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Rivertown

Janet Louise Roberts

Sarah was torn between the man she loved
and her father—in a town of imminent death!



Blast of Death

The car crept along. She kept turning her head nervously, watching for Lance.

Then she heard a shout, Lance's voice!

It came from the ruins of the cabin. "Sarah—on this side—pull up on the right! Behind the cabin!"

She could not see anyone. She obeyed him blindly. A shot blasted out of the woods to the left. She stopped the car at the edge of the cliff, on the right of the cabin, trying to turn it around. The car stalled.

Another shot whistled over her head, throwing her to the ground, frightened and deathly cold. . . .

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RIVERTOWN in any form.

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Chapter One

Sarah Tallentire had stopped in town after school to shop. She walked briskly past the hardware store, came to a halt at the dress shop, and studied the emerald-green-and-gold wool dress again.

She was standing and looking at it, when she became aware of the shouts. They crept first into her subconscious mind, absorbed in the problem of whether to buy or not to buy. Football really? Not today, she thought.

A shout came clearly, and she spun around, her green eyes widening as she stared down the street toward the courthouse. It stood four-square, red brick, topped with a white nineteenth-century cupola, in a square of its own green lawn. Now she saw that men were milling about the steps. The green was almost covered with people. A man stood on the steps, holding a garish red megaphone, and shouting into it.

Curiosity vied with fear, and won. She walked slowly forward past the drugstore, past the dime store. Men brushed past her, two turning to frown at her before racing on to the courthouse.

She paused at the shoe store on the corner, not venturing to cross the wide street to the courthouse lawn. Now she could hear clearly.

"The strip mining is ruining you! You are the ones who drink the acid water. You are the ones whose cows die. You are the ones—"

Someone bellowed from the crowd. "We're the ones who get paychecks from the mines! We're the ones who feed our families! Shit on you! Go back to Harlem and rouse the niggers! We don't want your kind around here!"

The bellows from the men drowned out both speakers. The yelling, jeering, catcalls, and cussing drove Sarah away. She turned the corner, raced back to her car, and

drove home along back streets. Her cheeks were burning, her eyes stung with angry tears.

"Those—those damn troublemakers," she muttered aloud, as she put the car in the large garage behind the house. "Coming from New York—stirring up the miners—welfare workers, hell!"

Her children would have been shocked and secretly pleased, she thought ruefully, brushing back her thick yellow curls, mopping her flushed face. She usually taught them English and French, not that kind of language. She went in the back of the large gray stone mansion, and was in the big sunny kitchen before she remembered her errands.

Mrs. Wilson turned from the stove to look at her gravely. Her plump cheeks sagged with an odd dismay.

"No, I didn't get the milk and sugar," said Sarah, before Mrs. Wilson could speak.

"Thank God you're all right, Sarah!" said Mrs. Wilson. "I heard there's trouble in town, everybody running down there. What's going on?"

"Oh, those welfare people stirring everyone up." Sarah sighed, reaching for a fresh raisin cookie and swallowing it almost whole. "Um—ummmmm! Good!"

"Drink some coffee with it, honey. I'll get milk tomorrow."

Sarah reached for another cookie, then started on. "Have to get ready for tomorrow." She heard voices, paused, frowning. "Who is here? Anybody I want to meet?"

"No, honey. Better sneak up the back stairs. It's your cousin bringing in that awful Parker Jameson and some of the miners. He's trying to tell your dad how to run the mines again." Mrs. Wilson sniffed disdainfully, and turned back to the oven.

Sarah tiptoed into the hallway, her briefcase on her arm, a cookie in her mouth, and listened.

"Those damn-your-eyes welfare people," said her cousin Franklin clearly. "Trouble, always trouble!"

"I could clear them out fast," said the heavy tones of Parker Jameson. "A few shots in their windows at night—"

Sarah stiffened, holding her breath. Franklin growled something.

Her father spoke, his voice weary. "No—nothing like that—sensible—will go away when—"

Their voices calmed, dropped. She went to her room, thinking, brushed cookie crumbs from the russet tweed suit, changed to green slacks and a pale-green cotton blouse. She was troubled. Rivertown was not the way she remembered at all, she thought. Why was the federal government so foolish as to send such firebrands to a feuding gun-toting town like Rivertown? It was dynamite.

She settled down to her work. It was two hours before she heard the miners stamping out, slamming car doors. She wondered what they had decided, then forgot the matter.

Sarah was in her first year of teaching in Rivertown, and had problems of her own—of which Lance Glover was not the least.

The next afternoon, Sarah was walking into the teachers' meeting when Lance caught up with her.

He put his hand under her elbow and held her back. "Hi, honey," he said.

She gave him a look. He only grinned, his devilish lighthearted grin.

"Hello, Lance," she said coolly. It did not do any good at all to rebuke him. Just because he had kissed her several times on their dates was no sign he could call her names in public. But the more she scolded him, the more brazen he became. He was extremely obstinate, as she had observed in their month of acquaintance.

"Sit with me," he said, guiding her over to some chairs at the side of the room.

"I'm sitting with Mrs. Lawrence."

"Fine. Jean! Come on over," and Lance beckoned to the middle-aged woman, who was just entering.

"Do you always get your own way?" Sarah asked.

He gave her that slanting wicked look from his gray eyes, and she felt her resistance melting away. "Always," he murmured, with emphasis. "Hi, there, Jean. How's things?"

Mrs. Jean Lawrence smiled, and said, "Fine," though she must have wanted to say *horrible*, Sarah thought. Jean's husband was a disabled miner on a small pension, who promptly drank up the money. Her two grown children had moved away, rather than stay near him. Patience

with other people's children made her a kind and loving teacher.

The principal of the high school, Orson Bowman, called the meeting to order and went briskly through the agenda. He was a crude self-made man, Sarah had decided, a big violent man, just under control. He "managed" the high school like a mule driver managing his mules. As the teachers argued with him, Sarah had the amused feeling he had quite a few mules to deal with.

They finally came to some agreement, and he concluded the meeting. "You-all come out to the football game," he admonished them. "If the boys act up, I want you, Lance Glover, and you Mike, and you Steve, you-all get on the spot right now. Don't want no trouble today, after what we had last week. Have to call the sheriff today, I'm cutting out sports this year. Mind now!"

His threat was perennial, Mrs. Lawrence had assured Sarah. The sports activities were dear to Rivertown High School and to the town. Orson Bowman would no more cut out sports than cut off his arm. But he believed firmly that threats did the job.

Lance caught at Sarah's arm as she would have risen to leave. "How about Saturday?" he asked urgently, looking down at her face.

His dark gray eyes were searching. They seemed to see right through her hesitation, her attraction for him, her reluctance to give way to that attraction. "I—don't know—dad said—"

"Dad said stay away from that Glover boy, the Glovers are a tough lot," he completed smoothly, his eyes gleaming. "Right?"

"Just about," she had to admit, flushing. She looked down at her green plaid skirt. "But if I go, you'll scold me about strip mining, and I won't listen to you!"

"I think you're sure pretty when your green eyes flash like that," he said, with a little laugh. His big hand brushed her elbow again, and the touch sent electricity through her. "Come on, honey. What if I promise not to talk about strip mining on Saturday, not a single word?"

She studied him thoughtfully. He was passionate and serious on that subject. When she had returned to Rivertown to teach, and to be company for her widowed father, she had anticipated trouble over the fact that her father

was the owner of the biggest strip-mining company for a hundred miles around. She had meant to stay away from the miners, from the devoted conservationists, and the anti-poverty workers who seemed to have *cause* as their middle names.

She hadn't counted on liking Lance Glover so much. Lance had taught here in his hometown ever since his discharge from the army. He had fit snugly back into the pattern of mountain life. He belonged here, he was a work glove on a hard hand. And Lance thought she could influence her father to reclaim the stripped land.

Lance was a smart man—word-smart and mind-smart. So she tried to pin him down.

"Do you promise, Lance, that if I go out with you on Saturday," she said very slowly, very carefully, "that you will not say one least word about strip mining? That you won't argue with me about dad and the mines?"

"I promise you solemnly," he said, his gray eyes on hers, "that I won't say one least word about mining or your dad."

She hesitated. He had given in too easily, but maybe he did like her well enough to respect her wishes. And she did want to be with him, dangerous though it was. She liked him too much, the big masculine person, the laughing devilish companion, the quick mind, the thoughtful spirit—Lance, himself, all man and tough and kind and good and hard—all at once.

"All right. A picnic?"

"Yes, if you want. I could bring—"

"No, I'll fix fried chicken and coffee and things. You pick me up about ten. Okay?"

"Okay. Tell your dad you'll be gone all day. We'll go up in the hills where it's pretty."

"That will be nice, I'll see you then," and she turned away from him. She met the knowing look of the principal, Orson Bowman, and flushed again.

"Going to the game, Sarah?" Orson asked brazenly, right in front of Lance. He was a big bearish bachelor, who loved to devil the girls.

Sarah had succeeded in avoiding Orson. "Yes, I'm sitting with the girls," she said flatly.

"And if she wasn't, she'd be sitting with me," said

Lance, behind her, a hand on her shoulder, as though in possession.

Orson laughed. He liked a challenge. "I'll see you there," he said.

Orson went on out. "You stay away from him," said Lance. "Honey, I mean it. And if he bothers you, I want you to tell me right now. Easier to stop at the first than have to shoot him."

Sarah spun around. "You stop teasing me with that talk! Do you think I wasn't born here? You're not shooting anybody!"

He did not smile. His face was grim as he stared down at her. "Might have to," he said quietly. "He isn't messing around with you, I mean that, Sarah."

Mrs. Lawrence came over to her. "Ready to go, Sarah?"

"Yes, ready." Sarah walked out with her, to the women's room, where they got their coats and scarves. Sometimes the wind across the open football field was sharp as knives, coming down from the hills and hollows like it was born in storm. "I wish Lance wouldn't talk like that," she murmured to Jean. "He makes me jumpy with his talk about shooting."

Jean Lawrence waited until the other woman teacher had left the room, leaving the place to them. "You've been away a spell," she said. "You weren't here when Robert Glover was shot. The feud that started was as bitter as any I've seen."

"Who shot him?" whispered Sarah, her eyes big. Her father had refused to talk to her about it, telling her curtly that the less she knew about feuds the better. He didn't mean to take part, he said.

Jean shrugged. "One of the Jamesons, who knows which one? Anyway, Billy Glover had got out of the marines. He came home, and the shooting really started. He got Rory McCleary in the leg, and got sent up for six months. That cooled things off considerable. Lance forced them to stop hunting each other—he has a good head. But he is a Glover, you have to figure on that."

"How does McCleary fit in?" asked Sarah, puzzled.

Jean gave her a veiled look. "He married Cynthia Jameson, the prettiest of the lot. Lance used to date her," she added, after a pause. "Now she has four children."

"Oh," said Sarah, not wanting to hear any more just

now. She had enough to digest, she thought. They went on out to the game.

It was a crisp autumn day. The open field was dry, and the game was fought hard. Sarah found herself on her feet, screaming hysterically along with the high-school and town crowd. They lost by two points, and her throat was raw by the time she and Jean and another woman teacher had fought their way through the crowd back to the parking lot.

Her father was waiting supper for her when she got home. The cook had prepared a huge meal: steaks, potatoes, peas, cider, and cake. Sarah sat down with her father in the large dining room.

His face is weary, she thought. He had turned gray since her mother had died two years ago. Now his face was lined, and thoughtful, not red and belligerent as it used to be. But he was still tough as any of the Glovers.

"How was the game, Sarah?" he asked.

"Oh, great, dad, I wish you had gone! We lost by two points, but Pete Jameson carried the ball right down the field, almost made a touchdown, then some big brute on the other side tackled him and knocked him out completely. They had to carry him off the field."

"Sounds fine," said her father, absently. "Sarah, do you want to come up to the mine office tomorrow? You asked about the operations last week."

She flushed guiltily. "Why—dad—I'd like to, but not tomorrow."

A pause. "Got a date?" he asked mildly.

"Yes. With—Lance Glover. We're going on a picnic. Which reminds me, I must fix the fried chicken tonight and get it cold."

Another long pause. "The Glovers are a tough lot, from up in the hills," he said, as though giving her news.

"The Tallentires are pretty tough themselves, dad," she said, gently, smiling at him.

"You like him pretty much?" asked Neville Tallentire.

"Pretty much," she said. So much that she tingled whenever she allowed herself to think much about him. So much that she almost feared being with him, yet was tempted to go out again and again with him. So much that when he kissed her, his firm mouth closing hotly over hers, she

wanted to melt against him and hug him and give in completely—which she would not do.

"Just so you know what you want," said her father.

Just then her cousin, Franklin Tallentire, came in. He was freshly bathed, wearing a black suit and a white shirt. "Sorry to be late," he said. "Didn't finish at the mine until six."

He sat down opposite Sarah, on her dad's left. "You missed a good football game," she said, not that he liked football, but it was a rather safe topic of conversation.

He gave her a look—cold, calculating. His sleek black hair was brushed back wetly. He was older than she by more than ten years, and he was in her father's confidence too much, she thought. They were the only ones left of the Tallentires, as Franklin was fond of reminding her. "I'm glad you enjoyed yourself," he said.

There were always lots of double meanings in what Franklin said, Sarah decided. He meant she was young, she was foolish, she liked football games and dating.

"Did you bring the account books, Franklin?" asked Neville, his hand brushing over his face rather wearily.

Franklin hesitated. "No—well, no, I didn't, Uncle Neville. Figured you was too tired to do them tonight. Why don't we let it wait?"

In the old days, Neville would have rebuked him sharply, and sent him back to the mines. Sarah felt a little heartache as she saw him frown, then give in. "Well, next week for sure, then," said Neville.

"We'll watch television tonight, dad," said Sarah. "There's some good things on that you like." And she could correct her English essays while he watched, she thought, and that would leave tomorrow free for Lance.

After supper, she went out to the kitchen, and prepared fried chicken. Mrs. Wilson, the cook, watched her sideways, and offered some tactful advice.

"It's been a long time since I cooked," Sarah said apologetically.

"Want me to wash up the thermos and get coffee ready in the morning?" asked Mrs. Wilson, without commenting.

"If you would, please."

Sarah went back to her room, and got out her clothes for the morning. After some study, she decided on her

green wool dress that set off her green eyes and short, blonde curly hair.

She would wear her wool coat and her short-heeled black shoes, in case they went walking. After a few Saturday dates with Lance, she had learned to dress for walking, she thought, her mouth twisting with amusement. He surely did love the hills, walking straight up or down them. He didn't care if he got into mud or creeks. She teased him, and said they couldn't get the mountains out of him, no matter how long he lived in town.

She went back to the living room with her papers. She liked the room; it was like her mother. It was pretty and light, with sturdy cherry furniture, the couch in red cloth, the chairs in brown and red. There was a huge secretary, with the bottom in drawers, the middle a desk top, and the glass-covered shelves full of books. Sarah put her papers on the desk, and switched on the television set.

Her father came in and sat down in his favorite brown chair, and put his feet up on a hassock. "What's on?" he asked.

"The news, then the 'Folks in the Valley,'" she said.

His face brightened. "That's right, this is Friday," he said, contentedly.

Franklin came in, sat down, and they watched the news in silence, except for a disapproving muttered comment or two from her father concerning government policy.

Her father soon nodded in front of the television. Sarah went back to her desk, and began correcting English papers.

Franklin looked over at her finally. "You going out tomorrow?" he asked.

"Yes, picnic with Lance Glover."

He frowned, looked at her father, who seemed asleep. "You shouldn't mess around with the Glovers," he rebuked.

"It's none of your business," she said, her mouth tightening.

"Sure it is. You don't know this town, Sarah," he said, importantly. He had moved here three years ago, and seemed to think he knew everything there was to know, she thought impatiently. "The Glovers are feuding with the Jamesons. Caspar Dickey is married to Marianna Jameson, and Parker Jameson is foreman at the mine."

"If dad doesn't mind, you should not," she said, significantly. She didn't care for mention of Caspar Dickey. He was a local politician, and she knew he was in her dad's hip pocket. The situation bothered her, though she didn't want to interfere. Caspar Dickey was so—so Uriah Heepish, she thought, always washing his hands nervously, drily, and his voice so apologetic. The way her father spoke to him, it was like to a slave. And he jumped like he was shot whenever her father gave an order. He came when her father called, and they talked in his study before Caspar Dickey went back to the capital.

After a pause, Franklin asked again, "Have those government agents been over to the school again?"

She knew he meant the anti-poverty workers. They were trying to help get the children to go to school, keep the older ones in school, and teach some trades. But they were mixing in local politics, which stirred up bad feelings.

"They bring the children from the hills," she said, finally. She did not tell Franklin they were talking to some of the teachers about health problems, using the pill for birth control, trying to get the older girls not to have affairs and get married. And they had been talking against strip mining.

"They are troublemakers," said Franklin. "When I think that my taxes pay for creeps like them, it makes me boil."

She knew better than to answer him. When she realized her father was deeply asleep, she gathered up her papers, and went to her bedroom upstairs to complete her homework.

She went to bed early. Lance had so much energy that she needed plenty of sleep to keep up with him.

Lance called for her half an hour early, as he often did. Time meant little to him. He did what he wanted when he wanted. He sat and talked to her father in the living room, while Sarah finished packing lunch. When Sarah came in with the basket, Lance got up. He finished what he was saying.

"Ugly rents in the hills," he said. "You ought to see what the dozers are doing."

"Talk to Franklin," said Neville Tallentire, coldly. "He supervises the work of the bulldozers. And he knows what he is doing. He gets at the coal the best way he can. He's good at his job."

"Lance, you promised not to talk about mines!" Sarah burst out indignantly.

"Promised not to talk to *you* about mines. I'm not talking to you, honey. Are you ready?" he said, and grinned down at her, and took the basket from her. "Got a warm coat? The wind is chill today, and it has a feel of rain."

"I have my coat," she said, and picked up her wool scarf. "Lance, you can make me so mad," she said, as they went out to the car.

"You get mad easy," he said, and tucked her tenderly into the front seat beside him.

He came around to the driver's seat. She waved to her father on the front steps, and he watched them start out. "I wish you wouldn't torment dad about the mines. It's his living! And the living of about a hundred men and their families, if I have to remind you."

He did not answer. She glanced at him, puzzled. He slanted a grin down at her.

"Purty day," he drawled, in a crude imitation of hill talk.

"You devil," she said, amiably. "Sure, it's a purty day. With clouds and rain coming, and I'm a fool for going on a picnic with you!" They both burst out laughing, and he took her hand, and put it on the wheel with his so he could hold her hand and drive too.

They took a route she hadn't driven before. He drove along the valley for a long time before starting up into the hills.

"Where are we going today?" she asked finally.

"Show you a new place, one you haven't seen. We used to have our cabin up there, in the old days," he said.

She looked up into the blue hills. The autumn day was hazy, and rain clouds were drawing up in the west. As they drove up the steep grade, she noticed the yellow-and-red autumn flowers, flaming in the woods. Some of the trees were turning, and the leaves were crimson and golden. Some bushes were red with bright berries. They passed a cabin, half-hidden from the road, and saw clothes hanging from a line, straggly flowers planted in front, and a small vegetable garden near the side. Several children played in the ravine near the cabin, the older ones looking after the younger.

When Sarah had first returned to the hill country, she

had been horrified at the casual way the children were turned loose. They didn't seem to be watched at all, except the small babies. Then Lance had pointed out that the small ones were always playing near the bigger ones, and each child was the special charge of an older one. There was a pattern under the casualness.

In church, sometimes, an older boy would take a fussing baby, rock it, hold it in tender arms, soothe it during the long sermon. They seem to love the babies best, she thought.

Lance looked at her as she glanced back toward the cabin and the children. He reached out a long arm and drew her up against him. "Sit close," he said. He rarely spoke tender words, though he could sometimes. He just seemed to want her near him.

She sat close, and put her head on his shoulder as he drove up higher into the hills. The trail twisted and turned, sometimes scarcely wide enough for a car. He drove a small car and she wondered if it was for coming up in the hills.

It was growing late. It was past lunch hour, and she was getting hungry. She wondered where he was going to stop. It wasn't like Lance to forget a meal. He could get ravenously hungry, and he was crazy about fried chicken.

"It's about one o'clock," she finally reminded him.

"We'll stop soon," he said. "I want to show you my cabin first. Old home where I was born."

She looked across an open ridge as he drove across a narrow stream, red and cold looking. The ridge was raked clean and ugly and orangey. The strip miners had been here, she thought. Sulfuric acid had leaked down into the formerly white and cold and clean mountain stream, leaving it rusty and poisonous to drink. Brush lay heaped high and ugly where the strippers had pushed it from the ridge, getting at the thick strips of black coal. And then the empty pockets of former rich land—brown and ugly and naked, finished and barren.

She bit her lips, and anger began to rise in her, anger and shame. Lance wasn't talking about strip mining today. He was showing her strip mining, where the dozers had pushed and bullied their way through the lovely hills, leaving them ravaged and unclean and infertile.

"Were you—born up here?" she asked, hoping his motives were not those she attributed to him. If he tried to use her to persuade her father to reclaim the hills, she would stop dating him, she thought. She would not be used.

"Yep. Up here in the hills. Our cabin—there it is." He stopped the small car and pointed.

She stared, and could have wept. A small cabin had once stood brownly against green trees; she could still imagine where it had been. Now it lay crushed and helpless and lifeless. Boulders lay on the roof. The porch was crumpled, the windows smashed. Above it was a pile of brush and dirt, and scraps of coal, and wet red sulfuric dust.

"It came down while I was in the army in Vietnam," said Lance, casually. "Want to get out and look?" Without waiting, he opened his door and got out, and came around.

She wanted to refuse, but thought it would be cowardly. She got out, without accepting his offered hand. He was looking down at her keenly, his gray eyes were very dark.

She got out, went past him, and stood looking at the crushed cabin.

"Behind there was a high ridge of pine trees," said Lance. "Used to smell great in the winter—a clean good smell. When ma and pop were married, they come here and raised a cabin. Folks helped them get started. Robert was born here, then Lizzy and the others, and finally me. I was the youngest. Ma died some years back. Lizzy and her kids, and then Robert's wife, Naomi, and his two boys moved in."

Sarah thought of the man Robert being shot from ambush, the wife screaming, and his two boys trying to get their guns and having to be held back. And the men went away, and Naomi and her sons went out and got the broken dead body of the husband and father, and loaded it on a mule, and went over to the house of Howard Glover, and showed what had happened.

Lance was talking with seeming casualness. "Ma had her clotheslines over there, from one pine tree to another. We kids used to climb the ridge behind there, and skin

up the trees and look out over the valley. Seemed the biggest valley in the whole world to us."

Rain splattered on his face. Sarah blinked as a raindrop hit her in the eye. She reached up and rubbed it away. Lance was walking around the place as though the cabin still stood, as though the people still lived there. She followed him numbly.

He went cautiously up to the crushed cabin, put one foot where the porch had stood. "We used to sit on the porch evenings," he said. "And we did our sums there, and read, until it was too dark to see. Lizzy used to look after me, she did my sums and heard my spelling. Ma was sick then, I remember. She died later. Pop lived here until—the cabin got crushed in. Then they all moved down farther in the valley, and built a new place, where they are now. I went to college, and came back and started teaching here, until the army, and then after Vietnam I came back to stay."

"You didn't have to go in the army," she said, looking at the scars of the valley she could see from there. Wide red ridges, barren brown patches, no more pines. The ridge behind the cabin was broken off like a sore scab, the top broken, the pines wiped away as though they had never stood for years. "You could have got exemption being a teacher."

He looked a little surprised at her remark. "I had to go," he said simply. "We always did go, all of us. Billy Glover was in the marines more than eight years." He said it proudly. She thought of the draft riots, the burnings of offices and papers, and shook her head.

They thought differently here, she reminded herself again. They had different ideas and different concerns, and they believed differently. Some said they had been cut off from the mainstream of American life too long. She wondered. Were they cut off—or were they America, and the rest of the country a stranger?

"The Glovers came over from England in the early 1800s," said Lance. "They hated being oppressed and told what to do. They went west, and west again, until they came to the mountains. Here they could be themselves, and not be pushed about. So they stayed. And built cabins, and hunted, and married and lived here with their

children, and their children's children. All in these hills and valleys."

Rain splashed in his face. It was coming down harder. He looked up at the sky. "I thought we could eat here," he said, "like I used to do. But I guess we better start back. It's going to pour down hard, I reckon."

They got back in the car in silence. She could have wept—for the ruined cabin, the ruined day, and the wrecked ridge, for the lost pines, and her anger and her shame, and her fury.

Chapter Two

Lance drove the small car cautiously. The rain was pouring down from the black clouds drawn up so close to the hills they looked like they were sitting on the peaks.

"Coming down hard," he said once.

Sarah sat closer to him. She didn't like being out in a storm, and up here the storms were more ominous than in the valley. In the valley, you had some shelter, a house, buildings, wind breaks of the trees. Up here, the elements could get at you, the rains and winds and snows and mountain streams. The pine trees lashed out and scraped the small car as it crept past them. The wind was howling steadily.

"Lance, it does look bad," she said, her voice quivering.

"Yep," he said, not reassuringly. He was frowning at the road. They reached the narrow one-lane bridge, which swayed as the car went slowly over it. He drew a deep breath. "There, we're past the bridge. That's good."

She gulped. When Lance was this serious, she knew it was very bad. The rain was pouring straight down in a heavy steady gray stream, almost like being under a waterfall.

"I never saw it rain so hard," said Sarah, cuddling closer to him. "Did you?"

"Yep. Used to rain like this when we lived up here. I reckon it's worse up in the hills. They have had more rain here," he added, as they came to a road beside a deep gully. Streams of mud and water flowed so rapidly across the road from the hill down into the gully that the car crept along in water to its hub caps. "Bad," he added, in a murmur, as the water splashed up alongside the doors.

The rain was coming from the west, from the valley and town. It was raging across the hills, furious at this barrier to its freedom. Lance was looking about, from

one side of the road to the other. She wondered what he was looking for, but she was too scared to ask.

Finally, abruptly, he stopped the car. "Road is washed out," he said simply. "Reckon this is a flash flood."

She stared ahead of them in horror. Beyond the purring car, the road narrowed to about half its size. Mud had washed down, and the road had simply disappeared.

"Lance—what—what are we going to do—?" she asked.

"Back up," he said, and began to back the car carefully up the narrow winding road. "Saw a cave a while back. We can shelter there. No sense in trying to go on. We'll just go over the side of the mountain."

She was paralyzed with horror. She had never been so frightened as when Lance backed that car up the narrow winding road, around and around, until he stopped it at nowhere. At least, it seemed like nowhere to her. The rain was pouring down so hard the sky was black, the early afternoon was as dark as night, and the rain was gray.

"There's a cave back in there. We'll stop for the night," he said. "I can't drive in this, we'd be foolish. Wait here till I see if there's anything in the cave."

She swallowed hard. "Any—thing?" she whispered.

He grinned. "Yep—a bear or a mountain lion!"

"Lance!"

"Oh, honey, you know better. There might be a skunk or a snake. You stay here while I stir up the leaves in there. I used to hunt around here," he added, cheerfully. He reached in the back, got a huge rifle lying on the floor, and checked the loading.

"Are you—going to shoot—?"

"Nope. Use it for poking around. Want me to use my hands?" He laughed down at her, his gray eyes shining with fun.

"No, of course not." He was teasing her, and she didn't like that. And she didn't like the prospect of sitting in a damp cave with a skunk either.

She watched Lance as he stooped and went into a narrow cave entrance almost hidden by overhanging vines and a tree branch. The car was only four feet away from the entrance, but she felt miles away as Lance disappeared inside. She looked about nervously. She was a coward, she thought, a town girl, though she had been raised near these hills. Her father never went hunting, because he was

too busy. She had ridden through the lower parts in a car, but she had never been this high up. She could see in the mist down farther into the valley, but from this height, and with the rain pouring, she couldn't see a sign of Rivertown, or the river that flowed through it. They seemed completely alone in the world.

The cabin. She remembered the cabin. If they could make it to that cabin, the folks would surely take them in. Then she grimaced—the road was washed out. They couldn't get to it.

Tomorrow. How could they do any better in the morning? Were they trapped until the road was rebuilt?

Lance reappeared, and ahead of his boots a little gray animal scurried, paused at the car, then scooted off into the rain.

Lance came to her window. She rolled it down. "Come on in, honey, the house is all ready," he said, with a grin. "Bring the picnic basket, I'm starved."

"What was that animal?" she asked flatly.

"Skunk," he said. "Weren't any snakes."

She groaned. "Does it smell bad?"

"Not bad. Reckon he didn't live here—he was just taking shelter like us. Come on, want me to get soaked?"

Reminded that he was standing out in the rain, she opened the door, got the handle of the basket, and dashed out into the elements and into the cave entrance. Then she paused. It was so low, so dark, and it did smell. Leaves, she thought, dried leaves and brush. But not skunky.

Lance hadn't followed her in. She set down the basket under the low rock ceiling, and peered out through the dripping vines. She brushed back her hair, which had gotten wet in the brief few feet of walk. Lance was getting blankets out of the car.

She sighed. Guess we're here for a spell, she thought dismally.

"Do you know all the caves hereabouts?" she asked, her mind busily working at her thoughts. They were going to spend the night together, if Lance had his way.

"Plenty of them. Sometimes I'm lucky and find a cabin like the one below. I know most of the folks around here."

He squatted down on his heels, and opened the basket. "Do you want to fight or to eat?" he asked, his gray eyes glinting at her in the semi-darkness.

"One more question," she said, more calmly. "How do we get back if the road is washed out?"

"Another road," he said simply. "If the rain stops by tomorrow morning, I'll turn the car about and start back up. There's a winding road from behind my old home. If we can get up there, and get on it, and it isn't washed out, we'll be back in Rivertown by noon."

"That's several ifs," she said.

"Yep," he said. He sat back on his heels. "Any other questions, Sarah?"

"I guess not." It wouldn't do any good. He knew these hills, and she did not. If he was lying, she couldn't prove anything. But she was pretty mad when she thought about how he had gotten her up here, on a rainy day, just to show her the strip-mining devastation, and his old home. The fact that the sight of that old cabin, so crushed and desolate, made her want to cry didn't help her temper.

"Reckon I'll catch some water for washing up," he said, and got up. He took the widest pan, and set it just outside the cave. She realized his head was dripping wet.

When he returned she handed him her woolen scarf. "Here, wipe your head. You'll catch your death," she said.

He accepted it as simply as it was offered, and rubbed his black hair briskly until the wet was rubbed out. Then he reached over and rubbed her blonde hair. "You're wet too. Sorry about this, honey," he added.

It was all the apology he would make, but it was quite sincere, she thought.

"That's all right, Lance. I reckon I just can't get used to the fact that a body can get stranded in this day and age. You'd think we didn't have any civilization at all," she said, thoughtfully.

He groaned. "You want to talk about civilization while I starve to death?"

She took the very broad hint, and got out the chicken, the salad, the cake and coffee. They dug in, and it did taste good. She always fixed about twice as much as she thought they would want. She never knew about Lance's appetite, and it was usually mammoth.

They ate about half the food, then he tucked everything away carefully into the basket. "Our breakfast," he said. "Well, we have plenty of water, anyway. Want a drink?"

She said yes, and watched as he brought the pan in. It

was full already. They drank from the thermos cups, then he put the pan back outside.

It was about four in the afternoon, and she wondered what they would do all that time. Tomorrow morning was a long time away, she decided. And the cave was quite small, and they were very close together in it. Lance leaned back against the wall.

"Want to talk about civilization now?" he asked, with a sigh that had humor in it.

"No, I guess I don't. Want to talk about school?"

"God, no," he said. "I think about that all week. My brain gets plumb weary from thinking about it. Did you know Annie Peters is pregnant?"

She took the news with some surprise. "Annie is only fourteen," she said finally.

"Yep. Reckon she'll quit and have it, then come back. Her folks will bring it up. She wants her education, but if she keeps fooling around with the Smith family she'll have one baby after another instead. Damn. I wasn't going to talk about school."

"It's hard not to. Our lives seem to be bound up in it, and the people of Rivertown. Lance—" she hesitated a minute.

"Yep?"

"Someone said—Jean Lawrence said—that you write poetry. Is that true?"

He hesitated a long moment. "Yep," he said finally, with a little change in his deep voice. "I asked her to go over some poems, to see if I could send them in somewhere. I don't know if I want them printed, though. They are private. I—I write because if I don't, I'll bust."

"She told me because she knows I like you," said Sarah, gently, a little embarrassed. Lance didn't like his private life invaded, she knew that.

"That's okay." He got up, spread out the roll of blankets near the side of the cave, and studied it. "I reckon that will keep us warm tonight, if we put one beneath us and the other two on top. Won't get too cold in the cave."

She looked at the blankets. She was wearing her green dress and her fall coat. That didn't bother her. Sleeping near Lance would bother her, though, even though they were both fully dressed. Talking a long time would be better.

"Maybe the rain will let up," she said, hopefully. "We might get back tonight."

"It's dark already. I won't try to drive in this," he said. "Don't like the idea of going over a cliff. And it's too far to walk."

He sounded quite final and obstinate. She knew there was no changing him. He had made up his mind. She couldn't wind him around her finger the way she could her father sometimes. That made her a little angry again, the very thought of winding Lance around her finger—as though she wanted to!

She had seen him most of her life, coming into town with his family, at the store where she went with her mother, looking at her with his dark gray eyes. She had returned his look curiously like a small child, but with more reserve when she was in high school. He had been two years ahead of her, the basketball hero, later he had gone off to college.

But she had remembered him, his leanness, his strength, the coolness of his mature young face. She remembered his gray eyes, the way he looked at her and studied her, without being insolent, just very interested.

Then meeting him again at the high school, and coming to know him so quickly, that it startled her when she realized she had been dating him only six weeks. She knew him better than she did any of the fellows she had dated at college. Maybe, she thought, she knew him because they were somehow alike, from the same town, the same region.

But they were different, she thought again, hugging her knees, and staring out at the rain dripping from the vines and bushes. He was a hill boy, she was a valley girl. He was from a miner's family, she was the daughter of the mine owner.

He had been looking out at the rain also, sitting hunkered up comfortably, as though he had done it a thousand times—sitting in a cave on the dirt floor, on a pile of leaves.

"Why did you come back to Rivertown?" he asked, after a long silence.

She jumped a bit. Had he read her mind? Or was it coincidence?

"Dad was lonely, after mother died," she said. "He sent for me, and asked if I wouldn't be happy here. I thought

about it, then applied at Rivertown High. They took me right away."

"Yep," he said, and she could see a grin slashed his face. Her eyes were accustomed to the darkness of the cave, and she could see him better now, though it was dark outside, and the night was coming on fast. "They wouldn't turn down a Tallentire. Especially not Orson Bowman. He been bothering you?"

She had opened her mouth to protest that her credits and references had been good; they didn't turn her down on that account. It wasn't being a Tallentire that had gotten her the teaching job. He had molded her thoughts as easy as clay, she decided indignantly.

"No, he doesn't bother me much," she said shortly.

"Sometimes he ties a snake inside a girl's desk," said Lance, easily. "I told him if he did anything like that to you, I'd beat him up. So you tell me if he does anything funny."

"I've heard about that," she said, and couldn't help feeling relieved. Ever since she had known that about the big bearish teasing principal, she had opened her drawers very cautiously and very slowly. She knew if she ever put her hand inside and found a cold damp snake, she would scream and lose the respect of her students. She had them pretty well under control right now, but that control was fragile.

"Most snakes around here aren't poisonous, just garter snakes and little ones," he said, conversationally. "Orson wouldn't put a poisonous one in. But anyway, if he does anything, I'll beat him up."

"You'll lose your job," she said.

"Not me, he wouldn't do it. Because our basketball team usually wins," said Lance, simply.

She shook her head. "Men," she said. "Is that why you teach phys ed and coach the basketball team as well as teach senior English?"

"Yep. You can always get another English teacher, you know, Sarah," he said, his voice teasing. "But basketball coaches who get winning teams are rare!"

"Thanks terribly much," she said, feeling a little bubble of laughter inside her. "I can also teach French."

"They don't want that around here much," he said, more seriously. "We ought to get some language courses

in, though, if we want more of the boys to go on to college—maybe even some girls. They could be teachers, if they would only stop having babies so early.”

“There were only three girls in the graduating class last year,” Sarah said slowly, gazing out at the darkness, the wet leaves, and listening to the murmuring of the rushing rain.

“Year I finished, there wasn’t any,” said Lance. “All got pregnant and quit year or two or three early. Amy Saunders might go to college,” he added.

Sarah shook her head. “Not now,” she said. “Jean says she got pregnant this summer. The Colter boy. But she doesn’t want to marry him. Her folks are pushing her, because the Colters are neighbor.”

“Too bad. She had a good mind in science,” said Lance.

“I think that’s why they are pushing her. They don’t think a girl should study science.”

There was another long silence. Sarah was beginning to feel sleepy, but she didn’t want to say another word. The longer they stayed up and talked, and delayed going to bed, the better the chance of Lance falling right to sleep.

She had the peculiar feeling he was reading her mind again, because he started yawning and stretching. Finally, he said, and she wasn’t surprised, “God, I’m getting sleepy. Let’s turn in,” and he sounded as natural as though they had been married a dozen years.

She tried to peer at her watch in the darkness, but she couldn’t see the dial.

“It’s past seven o’clock,” said Lance.

“I guess so,” she said. Slowly she removed the watch and put it in her purse, so she wouldn’t crack it on a stone in the night.

“You can take off your coat. The blankets will be enough, I reckon,” he said. He himself stripped off his wet jacket, but he kept on the rest of his clothes, except his boots. He had taken them off hours before.

“I’m not very sleepy yet,” she said, lying. “Why don’t you—”

“You crawl in against the wall, I’ll sleep on the outside,” he said, as though she had not spoken. “Anything comes into the cave tonight, skunk or bear or whatnot, I’ll get after it. Or do you want the watch-keeping tonight?”

She could have slapped his face. He was reminding her,

not at all subtly, that he was her protector. Without him she would be a lost babe in the woods, prey to skunks or "whatnot".

"I guess you're better at hunting than I am," she said tartly. She removed her coat, and finally crawled onto the first blanket. It was hard on the earth, though Lance had piled up some leaves beneath the blanket as a sort of pillow. She lay down, stretched out, finding her bones a little sore from the dampness. It would be much worse by morning, she thought dismally.

Lance crawled in after her, and pulled up the blankets. He covered her gently. "You can put your head on my shoulder," he offered, as though it might be a privilege.

"Thanks, not yet," she said lying stiff and straight.

He yawned, widely. "Okay. Good night," he said, and stretched out comfortably, his arm under his head.

"Good night." She lay awake awhile, waiting for him to make a move in her direction. A little surprised, after a while, she realized he was sleeping hard. Really sleeping, and snoring a little, until he turned over on his side with his back to her.

He had gone right off to sleep. Sarah blinked at the cave entrance. Was that a small animal sniffing outside? Or was it just the rain pouring down, dripping from leaves and branches?

She must have slept. She wakened to find the strange roughness of the blankets under her chin, and herself pressed against Lance's back. She stirred, remembered where she was, lay awake a little while, then slept again.

She wakened a little later, she had no sense of time. Lance was lying facing her, his arm around her, pulling her close. He was asleep. She was sure of that, and finally got to sleep again. It was warmer like this, his big body seemed to give out heat like a furnace.

She slept again, and dreamed that she was in a forest, floating above it, looking down into mist and rain. She seemed to be flying, her arms outspread. She could smell pine and sweet scents. She had a flower in her hand, and touched it to her lips. It tasted warm and sweet, like honey.

She moved, moaned a little, wakened slowly. Something was on her lips, something warm and sweet, honey sweet. Something was touching her lips, prying gently at them,

until she opened her mouth. Lance kissed her, his tongue against her lips, opening her mouth, pressing his tongue inside.

She tried to protest, coming awake vigorously, to find herself held tightly in his arms. She was outraged. She had trusted him! And while she slept he had—he had, somehow—he had made her body feel warm and soft—

His hand had wandered over her freely. She found her dress was being pulled up. She squirmed, tried to protest. He was holding her so—so beautifully—she didn't want—but he was being brazen—"Lance," she finally managed to say. "No—Lance—"

"Honey—honey—" he whispered, and his voice was deep and insistent. "Honey—you want me too—I can feel it—"

She felt it too, with dismay. Her body was soft and not at all outraged. She gasped as he moved, and lay above her. She was open to him, by his doing, his big firm hands.

She wanted to protest more, but no words came. He was moving, powerfully. She moaned, and he pressed his mouth against her throat, against the pulse beat there, and he was so strong, so big—

He pressed home. She cried out, and squirmed on the hard earth floor of the cave, but he was gentle, and then hard again. He took her, and she was so hot, so very hot—

Finally, it was over, and she had known her first man. He lay back and drew her into his arms, and she put her head on his shoulder, still panting, her cheeks wet with tears. He kissed her, and stroked his hand over her curly hair, and whispered to her. "Wasn't it good for you, honey? It will be, sweetheart. It will be the next time. Just wait, honey, sweetness—"

He never did say much to her. This was the most he had ever said, so tenderly, so gently. And later, he turned her on her back again, and made love again, slowly and gently, and then, when she could take it, he went at her more wildly, and she forgot herself and responded. She was sobbing, but with pleasure, and clawing at the shirt on his back, and she had never known such pleasure and keen joy and strange fury that was like fighting and like giving in and hating and loving—

He said later, holding, and petting her, "You're my girl. You're my Sarah. When we're married—"

"No," she said, but not moving her head from his shoulder.

He went on, with an assurance that began to anger her afresh. "When we're married, we'll have such times. You're the mate for me, I knew that right off. I've looked at you for years, you know that. When you came back, it was like you coming home to me. You felt that too."

"No," she said stubbornly, and this time she tried to pull away. He would not let her. "You had no right! I'm not going to marry you. You take too much for granted!"

He only laughed a little—softly, arrogantly, she thought. "You're stubborn, too," he said, affectionately. "Won't be easy to get along, my Sarah! But we'll have fun."

She pressed her mouth tight, and was silent. There is no arguing with him, she thought. But he couldn't force her to marry him! Wait till she got home, she would really tell him off.

She went to sleep, against his hard shoulder, hearing the slow, calm beating of his heart. It was oddly comforting, there in the darkness of the cave, in the middle of the forest, with the rain still pouring down like it wasn't going to stop.

When she wakened, the cave was lighter. Lance was holding her still. She moved, and tried to sit up.

"Still raining, Sarah," he said, as though continuing a conversation. She turned and looked down at him. "I got up a bit ago, and it's pouring buckets again."

She had to get up also, dash out into the rain, and relieve herself. It was embarrassing, though Lance didn't seem to feel any reactions. He just told her, when she came back, "Crawl into the blankets again. We might as well sleep till the rain lets up. Unless you're hungry."

She was more sleepy than hungry. She crawled across his body and lay down again. She thought he would sleep, but instead he took her into his arms and began kissing her. She turned her head to avoid his kisses, and he only kissed her lower down, where he had opened her dress.

"Lance, no more! I've had enough," she said, weakly. The way he kissed her made her feel so funny and confused inside.

"I haven't. Been wanting you a long time." And he kept right on, and took her again.

This time they both slept hard. They finally got up about noon, and ate the rest of the chicken, and drank the rest of the coffee, which Lance heated on a small fire. They talked, and looked at the rain, which was slackening.

"Reckon we can try to go later this afternoon," he said finally. "If we can't make it, we can come back. I can catch squirrel for supper. Or a rabbit or two."

She said, with careful restraint, not wanting to stir up his obstinacy, "I reckon dad will be worried sick. I want to get back if we can without much danger."

Lance looked at her thoughtfully, his gray eyes dark. "You tell your dad," he said quietly, "that I mean to marry you. I'll be around to see him next weekend and make plans."

She stiffened, her mouth tight. "I don't reckon I want to marry you, Lance," she said, coldly. "You forced me into this situation. I don't have to marry you."

"We'll see," said Lance.

Chapter Three

Sarah caught her breath again and again that afternoon. Lance had to drive the small car straight up the mountain, around and around the narrow curves, along the narrow roads. They had to cross the bridge again, and it was sagging and wobbly.

They both sighed with relief when they got across. Lance drove on, his mouth tight, his eyebrows drawn together into a black scowl of concentration. Up beyond the desolate crushed cabin of his boyhood, he turned off into a still narrower dirt road.

"Oh—Lance, will this hold us?" she finally gasped.

"It doesn't often get washed out," he said. "Have to try it anyhow. There won't be anybody coming up to mend the road today," he added drily.

She shut her mouth, and clenched her fists to keep from saying any more. The small car crept along. The rain had stopped, but the day was ugly. They turned around and around, winding down and down. The road was sometimes just wide enough for them, sometimes Lance drove right next to the side of the hill, rattling the car over stones and dirt. Finally, they came to the valley road.

Lance stopped the car. "Whew," he said. "Don't want to try that again for a month of Sundays."

He reached up absently and rubbed at his back between his shoulder blades. Sarah watched him, then realized he was stiff with tension. He said, "We'll be back in another hour or so."

"Turn around," she said. He turned his back to her, and she put both hands under his jacket and rubbed his back hard. She could feel the tense muscles relax.

"Ah, that's good," he said. She rubbed her thumbs

hard, pushing into the muscles at his neck. He bent his head, shook it like a bull. "You can do this all night if you want!"

"No thanks, I'd rather get home," she told him, and drew out her hands from under his jacket.

"Then I'd better get started," and he turned on the engine again. He drove in silence for the rest of the trip.

It was about five-thirty when he pulled up in front of her house. The door opened and her father came out to the car.

"Sarah? Where the devil have you been?" But he wasn't angry, just relieved, his face smoothing out from lines of worry.

"In a cave, dad. We got into a cloudburst, and the road was washed out. We had to wait till the rain let up to get back on another road."

She stepped out of the car and hugged her father impulsively. He practically made her ribs crack with his hug.

"Are you all right, honey?" he asked, drawing back to study her face anxiously.

"Hungry and tired, otherwise all right," she said. She turned to Lance, who had come around the car and taken out the picnic basket. "Thanks very much, Lance. I'll see you at school tomorrow," she said, so it wouldn't be so abrupt.

"Right. And I'll be over next weekend, as I told you," he said firmly. He looked at her father, hesitated, then nodded. "I'll be seeing you, Mr. Tallentire."

Sarah took the picnic basket from him, and moved her father away from the car. She wanted no talk between the two men today. She would warn Lance during the week not to say one word to her father about what had happened, or marriage, or her honor. She would shake him if he dared say one word.

"Good-bye, Lance. Come on in, dad, it's still cold out." And she went into the house with her father. She heard Lance start up the car and leave, and expelled a great breath of relief.

Franklin was standing in the hallway, looking at her disagreeably and questioningly. "Where the hell have you been, Sarah?" he said, as though he had a right to ask.

"I have explained to my father," she said curtly, and brushed past him. She went out to the kitchen, sat at the

table, had some coffee and eggs and bacon, unpacked the picnic basket, and told Mrs. Wilson her opinion of sleeping in caves. Her father came out to the kitchen as she reached that part.

He sat down, looking older than she had remembered. "You slept in a cave, Sarah?" he asked.

"Yes, finally. After Lance said he would clean out any snakes and mountain lions," she said, trying to make it funny. "Honestly, the primitive life is not for this gal! I like a bedroom and a soft mattress and sheets. Not a skunk or whatnot." She took another swallow from her cup of coffee.

"Reckon Lance probably had his rifle with him," said Mrs. Wilson placidly. "And there ain't been no mountain lions in these parts for some years back."

"Thank goodness," said Sarah. She yawned. "I'm going to get a long soaking bath and turn in. I don't know if I can face school tomorrow," she added thoughtlessly.

They both looked at her.

"I mean—I'm so stiff and sore. And those kids always know when I'm not feeling great. They sense it, and go after me. They're a real handful," she rattled on, trying not to read their minds.

Her father followed her up the stairs to her bedroom. He stood inside the doorway. "Sarah?"

"Yes, dad?" She brushed at the wool coat hopelessly. She would have to send it to the cleaners. Maybe Mrs. Wilson could get out the worst of the mud and dirt.

"Did he—did Lance—I mean to say—did Lance—"

She swallowed. She had never deliberately lied to her father in her life. She wished he would not ask, but somehow he got it out.

"Did Lance—make love to you last night?"

She went hot and flushed. She knew it.

"Did he, Sarah?" he persisted, looking at her anxiously.

"Well—yes, dad, he did. But I—let him. I mean, I liked him. And I—well, I let him." She could not stand the long pause that followed her words, and rushed on. "Dad, he's coming over next weekend to ask me to marry him. I mean, he has already asked me, and he's going to tell you—I mean, ask you—"

She became hopelessly entangled in her own words.

She gazed at her father, wistfully. "Dad, I don't want

to marry him—I mean, he is so obstinate, and he—he bullies me! I mean, he is nice, but I don't want to be pushed about, and he does push me—”

“Do you love him?” asked her father.

She paused. “Well—I don't know if it's love.” She flung up her hands. “I like being with him, and I—I like the way he makes love, and I feel warm and comfortable with him, and I like his mind, and the way he talks, and the things he thinks about—”

“I reckon you love him then,” said her father slowly, nodding. “Well, we'll see about the marrying. I'll talk to Lance this weekend.”

“But dad, I don't want to get married, not now!” she wailed, suddenly seeing the trap closing about her. “I'm—working, and I want to stay with you, and I have plans for vacation next year—”

Her father's dark green eyes, so like Sarah's, sparkled a little with mischief. “Reckon Lance will have something to say about all that,” he said, grinning a bit. “I should warn him I think you're a handful. He may not want to take on the taming of you, Sarah!”

“Dad!” she said reproachfully. “I'm not—I mean, I'm not so stubborn—”

He looked at her. “No?” he asked, simply. “Well, Sarah, you do what you want, and I'll stand by you.”

She groaned as he left her. She went to the bathroom and soaked in the big old-fashioned tub for about an hour, until the stiffness of her bones had eased somewhat. She kept adding bubble-bath, until the bubbles quite hid her rounded white body, the soft white breasts that Lance had kissed and held in his big hands, the rounded thighs he had held down as he—

“Oh, stop remembering, Sarah!” she scolded herself, feeling hot and uncomfortable.

At school the next day, she wore her gray suit, which was severely cut and rather prim. Only a green scarf softened it at her throat. She frowned at one of the girls in her class who was dreamy-eyed, and obviously pregnant. With any bad luck, Sarah might—no. She would not. It was the wrong time of the month for her, fortunately. And Lance wouldn't have another chance at her, she vowed passionately. She wasn't going to be one of the

sort who married after starting a baby, and caused gossip to run around Rivertown—

In the staff room, she brought her lunch over to sit beside Jean Lawrence, who greeted her warmly. "Sarah, how are you?"

"Me? I'm fine," she said, her thoughts on the poor essays turned in by her previous class.

"I mean—" Jean lowered her voice. "This weekend. Everyone was talking—are you all right?"

"Oh, that," she said casually, stiffening. "Sure. We got soaked some, but I don't have a cold coming on. Wasn't that some rain?"

"It sure was," said Jean. "Ah—did you see the program on strip mining Sunday night on television?"

"No," said Sarah, tight-lipped.

Jean said, after a pause, "Guess that wasn't such a good topic either!" She sounded so honest and rueful that Sarah laughed a little.

"It's too bad that I'm so sensitive, but I don't like to talk about it," said Sarah.

"About Lance and your weekend?" another voice chimed in, unexpectedly. Annie Kistler paused at their table, and slid her tray over near theirs. "May I join you? I've been hearing such strange stories, Sarah." There was a thinly veiled sneer in her tone.

Sarah wanted to say, "No, don't join us." But she couldn't do that. Jean said, "We are about finished, but do sit down."

Annie sat down promptly. She was a tall, slim brunette of about twenty-three. She had dated Lance before Sarah had returned to Rivertown, Jean had said. She taught math and home economics.

"Well, the stories are so fantastic, that the truth can't possibly match them," she said, vivaciously, her blue eyes shining with malice, as she stared critically at Sarah. "My, you are a sly one. I thought from what you said in meetings that you didn't approve of affairs. Or did you just mean for high-school students?"

Sarah raised her eyebrows, knowing she was getting red, but determined not to rise to the bait. "I don't approve of them," she said calmly.

"But weren't you out for two days with Lance Glover?" Annie asked shrilly. Conversations at the next two tables

had come to a dead halt. Several teachers had turned about to look at Sarah and listen frankly. "And spent the night in a cave?"

"My, my, how talk runs around," said Sarah, gently. Who had said it? Not Lance, he wouldn't. Not her father. Mrs. Wilson? Or Franklin! Damn him, it must have been Franklin.

"Do you deny the story?" Annie persisted.

"I don't say it's true or false. I just say it's none of your business," said Sarah. She stood up, picking up her tray. "Excuse me, I have some things to do, and the lunch hour is short." She moved away, gracefully, knowing Annie was staring at her and hating her.

Behind her, she heard a soft malicious voice, then laughter. Ears burning, she moved away, left her tray blindly in the right place, and left the staff room. She bit her lips, as she saw the principal staring at her, doubt in his face—doubt and a sensual expression on his face.

By evening, the word was around the school. By the next day, her class was unruly and difficult in the morning hour of the first period. The later classes were even worse. The boys were staring at her, lolling in their seats, not paying any attention at all to her words.

Well, she would just have to endure it, she thought grimly. She went after them hard, forcing them to answer questions, finally announcing a quiz, which they hated. As they bent their heads over their papers, and muttered about teachers who gave snap quizzes, she smiled to herself. She could, and she would, control her classes.

She might not be able to control the gossip of the Annies of her world, but she would not give any of them the satisfaction of knowing she was hurt. Besides, Annie Kistler was just plain jealous.

She saw Lance for the first time the next day. He gave her a quick smile, a slight wave of his hand, as he went on to another class. It was casual enough to disappoint the watching students in the hallway.

She had avoided Franklin during the week, but on Friday evening, he came home from the mine office early, and was there for dinner.

"I've been hearing a lot of gossip about town, Sarah," he said, as they began dinner.

Her father frowned. Sarah attacked directly.

"I'm not surprised," she said, bluntly. "You started the gossip, didn't you? How else did Annie Kistler know on Monday that I had been out with Lance for two days?"

Franklin raised his dark eyebrows. "You can't expect people not to talk in a small town like this!"

"It was dark when I returned. I didn't see anybody out. Who started the talking?" she asked him bluntly.

He smiled, shrugged. "Who knows? People look out of windows, don't they?"

"Franklin, did you start talk about Sarah?" her father asked heavily.

"Of course not, uncle. Why would I do that? I don't like her associating with the Glovers anyway."

Her father accepted his assertion. Sarah did not. He had lied before; she knew that. She frowned down at her plate.

Lance came over that evening. She might have known he would, since there was no football game. He knocked on the door, and Mrs. Wilson let him in.

Mrs. Wilson showed Lance into the living room. Sarah was grading essays, Franklin and her father watching the news on television. Sarah jumped up when Lance came in.

"Oh—Lance—I wasn't expecting you," she said, rather severely.

He raised his eyebrows at her, his eyes shining and dark gray. "You weren't? I told you I would be over. Mr. Tallentire, may I talk to you in your study?"

"Hmm," said her father, and got up slowly. "Yes, of course, Lance. Come on over."

The two men went into his study. They talked, and talked. Franklin kept muttering, "Wonder what keeps them so long. Are they talking about mining?" And he would look at her.

Sarah just shrugged, and underlined errors viciously with her red pencil. Finally, her father returned, looking thoughtful.

"Sarah, I reckon Lance wants to talk to you now."

"What about?" asked Franklin.

Her father just looked at him, in the old tough way he had used to have, and her cousin subsided hastily.

Lance was standing at her father's desk in the study. "Hi, honey," he said, when she came in. He moved to take her in his arms. She evaded him hastily.

She sat down in a straight-backed chair, and eyed him severely. "Lance, what did you say to my father?"

Lance leaned against the desk, gazing down at her. "Told him what happened—told him I loved you and wanted to marry you. Told him I didn't want your money, I can support you."

"Oh, Lance," she groaned, flushing red and angry. "I don't want to marry you! Just because you got—over-eager—in the cave—I mean—I don't think you meant..."

"That's what I told your father," he said, with his appalling simplicity and directness. "I hadn't meant to make love to you. But I woke up in the night, and you were there, so soft and warm, and I started thinking how much I loved you, and you were right in my arms, and then you moved, and sort of squirmed against me, and I just went crazy."

"Oh. I thought—I thought you meant to all along," she said, forgetting her line of argument.

"Nope. I meant to wait till we were married. But I wanted to marry you quick, because I'm crazy to have you. I love you, Sarah. And I think you love me too."

She ruffled her blonde curls distractedly. "It's just because of the gossip," she said finally. "You think you have to because Franklin told it about town, and people are talking—"

"No," he said, bluntly. "I meant to marry you all along. And, after the cave, I don't want you being with any other man. You belong to me, Sarah."

This stirred up her fury all over again, and she had almost forgotten it because of the sweet way he talked about her. "No! I don't belong to you!" she said hotly. "I don't belong to anybody! I'll choose the man I want when I please! I don't belong to you!"

"If you choose any other man than me, I'll kill him," said Lance, his mouth tight and straight. His gray eyes were not shining with fun when she stared at him.

"You quit that talk about killing!" she said, in alarm. "I don't like it! But you don't own me, Lance Glover! I belong to myself, and I'll marry when I want! No gossip is going to force me into marriage."

"We'll see," said Lance. "Are you going to be ready at seven o'clock tomorrow night for the dance?"

"Dance?" She had forgotten all about the dance. He had

asked her three weeks ago to attend the harvest dance with him in the high-school gym. Weakly, she said, "I forgot. Well—I promised to go—"

"Sure you did. Why don't you wear that pretty gray dress I can see through?"

"Lance Glover, you are not going to choose my clothes for me!" He had liked that dress because it fit her so tight, and he could see through the thin muslin to her soft arms and her throat. He had kissed her the night she had worn that dress.

"Not till we're married," he said, and now his eyes were shining.

"Oh, shoo! Go away! I have to finish my papers. All right, I'll be ready at seven! But I don't promise to wear the gray dress! Besides, it's too light, the weather is too cold." She made him go to the hall door with him, and pushed him away when he wanted to kiss her good night.

Her father looked up at her questioningly when she returned to the living room. Franklin was staring at her also, as she returned to her essays. Franklin finally became bored with television and went to his room.

"Well, Sarah?" said her father.

"No, dad," she said, flatly. "But I'm going to a dance with him tomorrow night."

"Um," said her father, thoughtfully, and got out his pipe, and filled it. "Might be nice to have grandchildren," he said, after a long pause.

"Dad"

"Well, I'm not getting any younger. And he has good blood in him. But it's your decision, Sarah. I'm going to bed," he added, placidly, after he got his pipe going. "I'll read the mine reports there. That ought to put me to sleep."

After he had left, she tried to finish the essays, but she finally put them down in exasperation, and stared at the dying fire in the big brick fireplace. Children. Lance's children. He had good blood. Her father really liked him, though they quarreled about strip mining.

That damn strip mining, she thought. If only they didn't keep bringing up strip mining all the time. It was partly the anti-poverty workers who did that, and made trouble, she decided. They kept the people stirred up, demanding their

rights and higher pay, and compensation for miners crippled from the pit mining.

Lance. How strong he was, his arms tight about her, murmuring against the excited pulse in her throat, as he had held her, and forced her firmly and taken her, making her like it—

She shivered, there in the cooling room. Finally, she went up to her own bedroom, and stood looking at the clothes in the closet. She did like the gray—but damn it, she couldn't wear it now that Lance wanted her to. She fingered it wistfully, then drew out another dress, and looked at it. It was a pretty bluish-green, an aqua that shimmered in the light. It fit her slim figure as though she were a sea-nymph, her roommate had said. And it made her blonde hair very blonde, and her green eyes mysterious. Yes, Lance would like it—

Saturday seemed to move very slowly. Franklin had brought home some of the account books from the mines. Neville Tallentire and Franklin shut themselves up in the office, their voices rumbling through the house as they quarreled over the books. Sarah kept frowning in their direction, wondering if she ought to go in and see what was wrong. But they always fought over expenses and bills.

It would be a bad time until the accounts were balanced, she decided, and would be a good time to stay out of their way.

She had a long soaking bath late in the afternoon, and in the evening, after an early dinner, she put on her aqua dress. It did cling more than ever, and made her skin seem pearly soft and white. She brushed her blonde curls briskly, then swirled them away from her face, leaving only a couple of curls in front of her small pink ears. She fastened the small strand of pearls at her neck, the pearl drops in her ears, then nodded at herself.

"Lance will flip," she muttered, then scowled at herself. Did she want Lance to flip? And why? If she didn't intend to marry him, it was unfair to want Lance to flip.

"Oh, hell," she said to her radiant image. She didn't know what she really wanted.

She heard the doorbell ring. It was a quarter till seven. That would be Lance.

Her father yelled up the stairway. "Sarah, Lance is here!"

"I'll be down in a few minutes!" she yelled back, and deliberately dawdled until after seven. When she came down, Franklin was nowhere in sight. Lance and her father were watching the news on television.

A little amused, waiting for the effect, she laid her black velvet cloak on a chair, set aside her black velvet handbag, and stood demurely behind the men.

Lance finally stirred as a commercial came on. "Government wants to manage us completely," he said mildly to her father. "Wonder if they'll let us—" He never finished that sentence. He had turned toward her father, and saw Sarah behind him.

He stopped quite still, staring at her, his gaze going up and down her. The look on his face was quite satisfying. He gazed at her and gazed at her, and his eyes got darker and darker.

Her father turned around. "My, Sarah, you look nice," he said.

"Thank you, dad," she said, and looked again at Lance. "Well, sir, aren't you going to say you are pleased? If you don't like the way I look, why, I'll go right back up to my room and cry my little old eyes out."

"You're a devil, Sarah," said Lance, and got up slowly, and came over to her. He took her elbows, drew her to him, and kissed her on the mouth, hard, his mouth twisting against hers demandingly.

Right in front of her father! She pulled back when she could, and that was only when he let her go.

"It that's—the way—you're going—to act—" she managed to gasp.

He picked up her velvet cloak and held it for her. "Come on, honey, we'll be late," he said, calmly.

"Have a nice time," said her father, grinning. "Don't go outdoors without Lance nearby. You know what those fellows do."

It was his usual warning. "Yes, dad," she said, meekly. "I've lived in Rivertown most of my life. The fellows here are—pretty rough," she said, and sent a burning look at Lance. The men exchanged a long look.

"I'll look after her like she was my own," Lance prom-

ised, and slanted a wicked sideways look at Sarah, and tucked her hand under his arm forcefully.

In the car, she said, "You can't go around kissing me all the time, Lance! I won't have it."

"You shouldn't look so sweet and pretty then," he said. "Why don't you wear something ugly, and make your hair all wicked and witchy looking? That might put me off. And don't wear that perfume, it's too nice."

"Oh, you," she said.

"Funny about girls," he said, philosophically. "They look all pretty, and pour on perfume to entice a man, then when he gives in and kisses like they're asking, they say, '*don't*'. Peculiar, ain't it?" And he laughed.

She had no answer for him, because it was just what she had been thinking. Did she want Lance to want her—or didn't she?

She had a good time at the dance, Lance saw to that. He introduced some men, including his cousin Billy Glover. Billy turned out to be a mild-looking man of middle height. He was more wiry than big, she thought. He didn't seem like the tough ex-marine and ex-convict that she knew he was. He seemed shy of her, and didn't talk much. She liked his wife, Elly May Glover, who was brisk and wiry also, gazing up at her husband like he was some kind of a god.

She had one dance with the principal, Orson Bowman. He held her much too tight, and praised her dress and her white arms too much, and she was glad when Lance came back to her at the end of the dance, and claimed her.

Someone got a red ear of corn, and wanted to kiss her. Lance just stepped in between, and said, "No," and the man got red and went away. The Jamesons were there, and looked at the Glovers, but no one got unpleasant. There was just some tension there that Sarah didn't like, giving her goosepimples.

When they finally left, she said, "My, that was a nice dance," in some relief, because it had gone well. Sometimes the dances ended in a wild fight.

"Yep, it was nice tonight. You looked beautiful," he said. He reached out and pulled her over to put her head on his shoulder.

He wasn't driving her home, she realized when she

finally sat up. He was parking in a dark grove of trees near the river, upstream from Rivertown. She looked about to see if any other cars were parked there. If it was a lovers' meeting place, she didn't want to stay and be seen again with Lance.

"Nobody else here," he said mildly.

"Quit reading my mind. I'd better go home," she added, as he reached out for her in the darkness.

"Later," he said, and drew her into his arms. His mouth, warm and hard, was searching urgently for hers. She held back, holding herself stiff, until his mouth found hers, and pressed on it, and his tongue licked at her lips.

"Come on, Sarah," he said, softly.

"You take me for granted," she said.

"No, I don't. You've been wanting me too," he told her.

"No, I—" His mouth closed over her open mouth, and he thrust his tongue inside her lips, and she just melted against him. His hands went up and down her inside the black velvet cloak, and his body was hot against hers, and urgent, and she knew he wanted her badly.

"Oh, Sarah, Sarah," he whispered.

"Lance, why do you—make me so—mad?"

"You're cute when you're mad," he said, and rubbed his rough cheek against hers. "Your face is so smooth and warm."

He kissed her again, and she lay against him, and felt him against her, wanting him but he didn't do anything except kiss her and fondle her.

"I love you," he said, lifting his face. She raised her hands and cupped his head and drew him back. "Sarah—tell me—"

She didn't want to talk. She wanted to kiss and be kissed, and to feel that hot urgent flow of electricity between them. "Lance—Lance—please—"

He held back stubbornly. "We could be married next weekend," he said. "I talked to your dad. Next weekend—Sarah—and then nothing holding me back, I could make love to you like crazy, like we both want—oh, my God, Sarah, I'm crazy in love with you—"

"I love you—" she finally whispered, when he kept urging her. "I do—love you—oh, Lance!" He caught her up, and kissed her all over her cheeks and mouth and down to her throat. She lay back in his arms, and felt

him kissing her throat, over the pulse beat, and down against the tops of her white breasts, and she remembered vividly the night in the cave.

She thought he might lose control. She didn't know whether she was sorry or relieved, when he finally pushed her away and sat up again.

"We're going to be married next weekend," he said forcefully. "My God, Sarah, you drive me out of my skin! I never wanted a woman like I want you. If you don't marry me quick, I'll take you back up to that cave and keep you there all winter!"

"Like a bear," she teased, smoothing her ruffled curls. "You are like a bear, Lance, you really are—"

He put his fingers on her breasts, and teased at them, and she caught her breath audibly. He laughed softly. "You want me too. Why be coy, Sarah? We both know what we want. You going to make me wait just to be mean?"

She thought about that. She hadn't meant to give in. But her whole body was burning for him, she wanted him so much. She had never met a man who could make her whole body flow like molten lava, melting against him. She had never met anyone who could make her desire his kisses so she would do anything to feel his lips again.

Anything at all—even giving in—

She leaned back against him, and looked up at him, and put her hands on his head. "Yes, Lance," she said, sweetly. "I mean—yes, I'll marry you. Because I love you, and I don't want to be mean in my loving. I love you—so much—"

He caught her up, and went at her like a bear, licking honey from her. They were both a little crazy then, and it was late when he took her home. He didn't want to spoil the wedding night, he said.

Chapter Four

Sarah never knew afterward how she prepared for her wedding in one week. They were married on Friday evening, in the living room, with just the immediate families there. Billy Glover stood up with Lance, and Elly May stood up with Sarah.

She had already quarreled with Lance, and the quarrel continued on their brief honeymoon. After ice cream and cake, they got into Lance's car, and started driving south. She didn't know where they were going, and right at the moment she didn't care. She was happy and angry all at the same time.

Her father had asked them where they were going to live.

"Lance is going to get us an apartment, dad," she had said. "He's living at Billy Glover's right now, but that is just a room. Besides, we want to be alone."

Her father had looked rather odd, biting his lip and frowning.

"What, dad?" she asked, knowing him.

"Well, Sarah, I was just wondering," he said, very slowly, and carefully. "Couldn't you-all stay here for a spell? There's plenty of room in this big old house. Then you could take your time looking for a place."

In a flash, she realized why he had brought himself to ask. He was desperately lonely. He had depended heavily on her mother, and she was gone. He had little in common with Franklin except the mine. Mrs. Wilson was a good soul, but he couldn't confide in the cook.

In the car, she said to Lance, "I came back to River-town because of dad. He was so awful lonesome. He doesn't have a big family as your dad does."

Lance set his mouth, frowning into the darkness. "We'll talk about it later," he said, finally.

She slid over on the seat to sit close to him, and put her head on his shoulder. "I really hadn't planned to marry so soon," she said.

"Don't tell me you're sorry already. The preacher has hardly finished telling you to obey me," he drawled amiably. She knew his eyes were probably devilish.

"He did not say obey, I told him not to," said Sarah.

"You weren't listening. I told him to put it in."

She tickled him in the ribs. "Devil," she said. "He did not!"

"He did, and you quit that, unless you want to spend your wedding night in a cave! You want me to drive on to a nice place, okay, but if you act up I'll put you back in the cave."

She knew better than to dare him. She put her head on his shoulder. It seemed impossible they were going on their honeymoon. She had really known him only the past two months, though she had seen him most of her life. Yet she was sure of him—as sure as a girl could be, she thought.

Lance drove south more than two hours, then finally stopped the car in the middle of a country road. "Here we are," he said.

She peered out into the darkness. "Where are we?" She had expected a nice small motel, an impersonal place, where they could be alone most of the time.

"Cabin of a friend. He's away, and said I could use it. Come on, I'll unlock the door, then bring the suitcases."

He got out, opened the door for her, pulled her up into a bear hug. After he let her go, she looked beyond him to the cabin. It was a small neat two-room place, against the hills, and she could smell pines beyond the rooftop.

Lance unlocked the door, picked her up, and swung her over the threshold as she squealed. When he set her down, he scratched a match, and lit a kerosene lamp on the table. The room sprang into gentle light. It was a combination living room and kitchen. Beyond was a bedroom, with the bed neatly covered with a colorful knit afghan.

Lance brought in the suitcases and set them in the bedroom. Sarah pretended great interest in the wood-

burning stove, looked at the cupboards, and the hand-carved table.

Lance came back. "Are you hungry?" he asked.

"No, not specially. Are you?"

"Nope. I'd rather go to bed," he said, and went over and locked the door with the wooden latch. "I'll take the lamp in."

He was carrying away the only light in the place, and outside seemed pitch dark. Sarah followed him with some reluctance. He set the lamp on the dresser, looked about him. "Guess everything is fixed up," he said. "He said he would have a woman in to clean. Sometimes the place looks like a rat's nest."

She could smell the strong odor of cedar and pine. The cedar came from the hand-hewn furniture. The pine was from outside the windows, from the hillside of trees. The odor was fresh and heady.

On the dresser was a vase of clay, decorated skillfully with oval designs. Someone had brought flowers, the last of the roses in delicate pink, some vigorous wild flowers, a tall stalk of green. She touched it, grateful for the pretty gesture.

She turned around, Lance was practically undressed. She took her gown out of her suitcase, and her robe, warm and wooly. She undressed, her back to him, knowing he was waiting not very patiently.

She was ready. She slid into the bed, moved down gratefully into the smoothness of sheets. She had been afraid there would only be rough blankets under her.

Lance got in, and drew up the covers.

"The lamp," she said.

"I'll leave it on tonight," he said. "Gets pretty dark in here." He bent over her, and she could see his face, dark and intense, before he bent closer and kissed her mouth.

He made love to her, so intensely and slowly and beautifully, that she was crying before he finished. She was shivering, but not with cold, and she had never felt so wild and crazy and marvelous in her life. He had her gown off, and thrown over the end of the bed, and he wasn't wearing anything either. It was just them, naked, and beautiful to each other, and him stroking her face when it was over.

"You are so lovely, my Sarah," he whispered. He drew

her over to lie with her face against his bare chest, and he stroked her back slowly, until she stopped crying.

They didn't get much sleep that night. So when morning came, they were sleeping soundly, and not wanting to get up. Lance kept nuzzling against her, his face on her breasts, his hands over her, learning her all over, and she didn't want to move away, her hands caressing his head and learning his body also.

It rained all that day, a steady hard November rain. The sky was so dark, and full of black rain clouds, that the cabin seemed full of night and sleepiness. They kept the lamp burning all the time, and that was their only light.

They ate something, dreamily, and fell back into bed again. They talked a little, under the warm covers, murmuring into each other's ears, the rain pattering hard on the wooden roof.

They didn't get dressed until noon the next day. The rain had finally rumbled and growled away over the mountains, and the sky was breaking into little pink and golden pieces as the sun fought its way through. Sarah put on jeans and a sweater, and went outside with Lance, behind the cabin. They climbed up the steep hillside, until they were up to the tall pines behind and looking down on the cabin, half-hidden now.

There were no other cabins in sight, not a sign of human life. Birds wheeled and dipped and swung over the trees, ducked down into them, and wheeled to soar upward again. Their songs were free and lilting in the afternoon coolness. The pines smelled stronger than ever after the rain, and there was a fresh thick odor from the leaves on the ground.

They sat so quietly on the mound, looking down into the valley and up into the sky, their hands clasped tightly, that the animals near them forgot the intrusion. Squirrels ran busily about, their bushy gray tails whipping in the wind, their mouths chunky and full of nuts being carried to winter storage. An impertinent curious chipmunk whipped his striped orange tail, as he stared at them with bright eyes, then chip-chip-chipped his words at them.

It's so clean and quiet up there, thought Sarah, so full of fresh good smells—the pine, the briars, the wind, and the wet earth. A gray rabbit sat up, stared at them, twitched his nose nervously, dived down again. Quail

walked across their path, a bob-white and her little ones moving past fearlessly.

Lance stirred, put his arm about her, drew her closer, pressed his cheek against her curly hair. He didn't say a word; they didn't talk for a couple hours. They didn't need to.

From the hill, they could look out over miles of hills and valleys and forests. It was like the beginning of the world, with no other person in sight. Some of the autumn leaves still flamed golden and red on trees, some had turned brown and were falling whenever the wind blew. Across the hills were the green of the evergreen trees, and streaks of yellow from a planting of maples.

They were facing due west. As they watched and sat and looked, the sun began to sink down through clouds of gray, tinting them delicately with pink and violet. Then, as it sank further, flames began to light up the western sky. A flash of orange burned across the west, splitting the gray clouds. Deeper rose red raged about the orange, flushing a rose color over the hills and graying trees, until it seemed the mountains were full of fires.

Then the colors softened to pink and violet and softest rose—dying, softening, gentling, after the sun had disappeared. The sky slowly turned darker blue, then vivid purplish-blue as the first stars began to pierce through the sky.

Lance turned Sarah, and laid her down on the ground, and began to make love to her, as though they too must share in the ritual of nature, and its death and renewal. She felt the crushed leaves under her body as he moved her more fiercely, and a small twig scratched her back as she moved more hungrily, and responded to his movements.

It was the best yet, she thought later. They were together so thoroughly, so completely, so at one with each other and the world, that she didn't want it to stop at all.

It was turning colder, and they had to go. Holding hands, they walked and slid and slipped down the hill to the cabin. The leaves were still wet from the overnight rains. A wind was rising more strongly, chilling their warmed bodies.

In the cabin, the lamp was burning very low. Lance filled it skillfully, as though he had done things like this

for years, as he probably had, she thought, watching his big patient hands. He had been raised in the hills, and no electricity wound its wires through the trees.

She went over to the cupboards, and studied the cans there. She finally fixed a dinner, and they ate, not talking much at all. While they drank their coffee, from the tin mugs, hot and strong and sweet with sugar, they clasped their hands again, not wanting to lose touch. Lance kept looking at her, studying her face so closely that she thought he was learning her all over again. In the night, she had wakened time and again, to see him bending over her, touching her, studying her face with that look that made her feel hot and happy all at once.

"We'll have to start back at five tomorrow, to make it to school," he said, finally, reluctantly.

"I reckon so." His words seemed to break a delightful spell. She sighed a little as she got up and cleared the table. He was still sitting there, tracing a design on the rough wood. She came up behind him and put her arms about him, and hugged him back to lie his head on her breasts.

"I love you so much, Lance," she whispered, rubbing her cheek on his thick black hair. "I wish this wouldn't ever end."

He did not answer, except to move his head slowly, luxuriously, against her breasts, and to press his big hands over her hands on his chest.

Morning came all too soon. Lance wakened her, and she stirred and didn't want to get up. It was cold in the cabin, she wanted to lie in the warm bed with Lance for another ten hours, she thought, reluctantly sticking her legs out.

She washed from the basin, and got dressed, in a demure outfit of gray skirt and white blouse. "Back to school," she said, making a face in the mirror as she brushed her blonde curls briskly.

"After you start a baby, I'll let you quit school," said Lance, behind her. She looked farther in the mirror to his face, and saw he was slanting his wicked look down at her.

She didn't answer, knowing they had to be on their way, and any teasing reply might bring on repercussions, delightful, but time-consuming.

They were soon on their way, stopping for coffee and eggs halfway back to Rivertown. They made it to their

classes in good time, though Sarah wanted to yawn. Her students were watching her alertly, so she had to frown and be stern with them, and hide her weariness.

It was almost the end of the day when she had the thought, "Where are we going to live?" Lance hadn't said another word about the matter, and she had forgotten it completely during their marvelous two days.

In the car, with their suitcases in the back, she sat and waited for Lance to say something. He finally did, starting the car, and frowning at the traffic ahead of them in the parking lot.

"I've been thinking, Sarah," he said. "Reckon we could live with your dad until we get a place of our own. Reckon he would be lonely for a while, if we pulled right out."

She reached over and kissed his cheek impulsively. "Thank you, honey," she whispered.

Within a day she was half-regretting her victory. It was difficult to live in the same house with Franklin Tallentire. He was clearly furious with her for marrying a Glover, especially Lance Glover. And, worst of all, her father quarreled with Lance.

She couldn't say much to Lance yet. So she spoke to her father. "Please, dad, don't talk to Lance about strip mining. He feels so strongly about ripping up the hills."

"My God, Sarah, he starts the talking," her father protested, red-faced and scowling. "And he makes me so damn mad. Talks about my shutting down the mines altogether! Now, I could try the reclamation, though I don't see the need of that. But damn it, he's not going to put me out of business!"

"Of course, he doesn't mean that, at least not in the near future," said Sarah, cautiously. She didn't really know what Lance was thinking. "But please, dad, don't fight with him. I love him so much, and we do want to live with you for a while. Later, we'll get a place of our own, and it won't be so hard at dinner and such."

"Wish that damn idiot Franklin would keep his trap shut at meals," her father growled. "It spoils my appetite, the way he talks about the Glovers, and feuding, and miners. Just gets Lance stirred up, and I don't like that."

"I don't either," she sighed. She hugged him. "Help me keep them apart, dad. I knew it would be hard, but I didn't know it would be so bitter."

Her father softened, and promised to help. But the next weekend, Lance brought home Martin Seidman, Adam Wisniewski, and Donna and Jimmy Fox. Sarah could scarcely believe it when she answered the door and found them there. Lance was parking his car.

She stared at them. She had met the anti-poverty workers at school and in meetings, but she hadn't made friends of any of them. Lance came up behind them as she was standing there staring.

"Let's come on in," he said, and his look was a rebuke at her. "Sarah, you know Mrs. Fox—Jimmy Fox, Martin—Adam."

"Y-yes, how do you do?" she stammered. "I—I wasn't—I mean—Lance, you didn't mention—c-company—"

"We had some talking to do, and thought we might talk better over coffee," said Lance, showing them in. "Let's go in the library, folks. Sarah, could you stir up some coffee and sandwiches? We've been talking so long we're dry."

"Oh—sure—right away," she said, and ran out to the kitchen. In the middle of Saturday afternoon, her father would waken from his nap at any time, and Franklin would walk in from the mines. "Oh, God," she muttered aloud.

Mrs. Wilson said, "Are you cussing, Sarah?" rather severely.

"You bet I am. Lance brought four of the anti-poverty workers here, and you know Franklin! I'll fix coffee and sandwiches, you get the firemen on the phone for when the bombs go off."

"Now, Sarah," said Mrs. Wilson, looking beyond her.

Lance was coming into the kitchen, and he had heard her. "Sarah, you know better than that," he said, and he was mad. "They don't set off bombs. People throw explosives at them! They are the gentlest people I know, the best-hearted. Who else would come here to these god-forsaken hills and try to do good for folks they never met before?"

"I'm sorry, Lance," she said, flushed. "I didn't mean—I'm sorry—" She grabbed the coffeepot and filled it with cold water, and measured out the coffee. Mrs. Wilson had bread, meat, and lettuce.

"I thought when I came here, I could bring my friends to the house," said Lance, too quietly. His gray eyes were

flashing brightly, sparkling with fury. "If your dad objects—"

"It's your house, too," she said, hastily, and was glad when he went back to his friends with the first tray of sandwiches. She got out cups and saucers, hating herself because she didn't want to use the best china, the way Lance would expect. She set out the pretty white cups with the gold bands, and the silver spoons. They looked so crude, in their jeans and rough jackets, with their hair so long and straggly. Even Donna Fox dressed as though she didn't know what being a lady meant.

The visitors were arguing heatedly when Sarah brought the tray into the library. Lance was talking to Jimmy Fox, Donna was fussing at Martin, the tall Jewish fellow so intense and serious and passionate about everything. Only Adam Wisniewski saw Sarah come into the room. He was an older man, with a thick Czech accent. He got up, helped her clear a space on the table, already strewn with papers.

"Allow me to assist you," he said, his round face flushed. He added in a low tone, "I am afraid—we surprise you—too much. Husbands—not always considerate fellows!"

He looked down at her pleadingly, and she knew he had read her thoughts. "No, they aren't," she whispered back, and grinned a little. "Lance never plans ahead, or if he does, he doesn't tell me! I guess I'll have to get used to it!"

"Lance is a good man," said Adam slowly, considering. She was unexpectedly pleased. She had not thought she would value his opinion. She stood, pouring the coffee into the dainty cups. Then she wasn't sure what to do.

She looked at Lance, sitting there, with his cup of coffee forgotten while he talked spiritedly to Martin. His face was eager, for he was talking about strip mining and the pensions that had not come, and the fact that four girls were having babies in the next month. Sarah thought, I've never seen Lance so keen! and was unexpectedly hurt. These people had the power to plunge a knife in her heart, she decided then. They were outsiders, able to take Lance away from her with their ideas, their strengths, their differentness.

"Please to sit down," said Adam.

"I—I don't know what you're talking about," said Sarah,

slowly, looking at Lance again. "I—wasn't sure you wanted me to stay and listen."

Lance looked up at her, his eyes dark gray and fathomless. "Sure, Sarah, stay and listen. We want you to."

We, he had said. Not *I*. She almost left the room, then decided that would be petty. She sat down where she could reach the coffeepot and listened, bewildered at the talk.

About two hours later the doorbell rang. Nobody went to the door. Sarah finally got up, and went herself. She was stunned when she found Caspar Dickey on the doorstep.

"Well, Miss Sarah, how pretty you look! I have an appointment with your father. Am I too early?" He walked in, with the jovial friendliness of a long acquaintance, and of a politician.

She had never liked him, but today she was horrified to see him. If he looked into the library—

Just then Martin Seidman came out of the library. "Is that Peter?" he asked, and saw Caspar Dickey. "Oh—it's you," he said flatly, not hiding his dislike. He turned rudely, and went back into the library.

Neville Tallentire came along the hallway behind them, and spoke to Dickey. "Come on in my study," he said, rather coolly. "The library is occupied just now. We can talk in the study." He gave Sarah a long look. "Do you know how long—Lance's guests will be here?"

"No, dad, I don't know," she said, miserably. She might have known her father would be awake and aware of what was going on. She started back to the library, only to see Franklin standing at the end of the hall, near the kitchen, staring at her and scowling. Well, they all knew now, she thought.

She returned to find the "guests" beginning to leave, gathering up their papers as they talked, and putting on coats and jackets. Donna Fox slung on a thick garment, vaguely like a Mexican ruana, which made her thick figure even bulkier and unfeminine, Sarah thought.

She was a little sorry for her, though, when the woman smiled and spoke in a friendly manner.

"I'm sorry we inflicted ourselves on you this afternoon," said Donna. "I know what it's like to get company without notice. My kids are always bringing home a friend. Remember that kid who stayed with us for two months, Jimmy?" And she laughed heartily.

"Your children—they aren't here?" asked Sarah. She had not known Donna had children.

"My God, no," said Donna, bluntly. "We're in too much danger here. I left them with my aunt; she adores the brats. We'll be finishing up in another month or two, and maybe I can get back with the kids for the rest of the winter. Jimmy might go on farther south—we aren't sure of the assignment yet."

They left, with cheery words and loud comments and laughter, not at all uneasy. Adam Wisniewski shook Sarah's hand, wished her well on her marriage, and bowed to her with old-world courtesy. They are such a mixture of people, Sarah thought, as she closed the door. Lance went back to the library to gather up his papers, and take them upstairs to their bedroom.

Dinner was late. They seated themselves after seven o'clock. Sarah was grateful that Caspar Dickey did not remain for the meal, as he often did.

"I sent him away," said Neville Tallentire bluntly. "I wanted to talk to Lance. I didn't realize you were going to invite such people to the house, Lance."

Sarah jumped. Lance said, coldly, a white line about his mouth, "I understood I was to feel this was my home, sir," and Sarah could have groaned.

"Of course it is," Sarah began hastily.

Her father went on as though she had not spoken. "You know I don't like those people, I don't trust them. They are troublemakers, sent here by a government who has no control over them. Why, the Foxes are known Communists. And that Czech fellow—"

"He's more dangerous than any of the others," said Franklin, chipping in eagerly. "He didn't leave Czechoslovakia until two years ago! Why, he's an out-and-out Communist spy."

"That is ridiculous," Sarah began.

Lance took the argument from her and carried it. Her father and Lance and Franklin quarreled vigorously all through dinner, managing to cover the anti-poverty workers, government interference with the private lives of people, strip mining, ecology, politics, and corruption at the local, state, and federal level, until Sarah was thoroughly sick of the whole matter.

Worst of all, Lance was so angry and stirred up that he

couldn't sleep that night. He did not touch her in bed. He lay with his arms behind his head, until she finally fell uneasily sleep. She awakened in the night to find him standing at the window, the curtains opened, staring out at the far hills.

"Lance," she said. "It's cold—come back to bed, honey."

He finally came back, but he was cold and stiff, and didn't respond to her coaxing.

"You don't have to mind Franklin," she said finally. "He's just a cousin, he works for hire—what he says doesn't matter—"

"He hopes to run the mines when your father is gone," said Lance, quietly, staring straight up. "He'll be the cruellest, most vicious mine owner we've had in these parts. He is already doing a lot of mischief. Can't you see it, Sarah? He's wormed his way in with your father. We have to stop the strip-mining soon, or men like Franklin will be running things completely."

She was silenced—devastated, and appalled. She had not thought ahead to her father's death. She had not thought of his will, of who would own and run the mines. She even thought that maybe Lance had married her to have a say in the mining. Oh, no, no, she thought. She turned to him, tried to reach out to him wordlessly. But he could not be reached tonight.

Chapter Five

The uneasiness continued. Sarah dreaded every evening at home, because her father and Franklin and Lance scarcely ever had anything pleasant to say to each other. After dinner, they separated. Sarah had a choice of going to whatever room Lance chose to work in, or sit with her father at the television. She usually chose to work with Lance, because she had homework to grade and lesson plans to write.

They had settled on a back room of the first floor, and Sarah quietly arranged it as a study for herself and Lance. A large old dining table, discarded and in the attic, was brought down to make a combined desk for them. Lance moved his bookcase into the room, and Sarah brought in several comfortable chairs.

It was like having a separate house for herself, and a separate one for her dad, she thought, and was sorry. But she had married Lance, they were a couple now, and she really had no choice—not if she wanted to stay married.

They were sitting at the table, busily grading papers, when the doorbell rang. She heard Franklin going to the door, calling back to her father.

"Yes, he's here—back at the end of the hall," said Franklin, to someone who had spoken inaudibly. "Go ahead—"

Lance went to the door, moving with the lithe grace and speed of a mountain cat, thought Sarah, lifting her head from the circle of lamplight. "Who's there—Billy! Something wrong?"

Billy Glover came into the room. Sarah looked up at him, and thought it was how he must have looked going into battle. The mildness of his expression was gone. He looked hard and taut. His face was thin, the cheekbones high, and his hair was as black as Lance's.

"Trouble, Lance," he said, biting the words. "The dozers were cutting above Hillman's cabin. They went at it, and they knocked down the graves—William and Sarah Anne's graves. They're pushed down the hill and into the river. We can see the pine coffins settling down into the water."

"Oh, my God," said Lance, softly. Both men stood still, staring down at the floor.

Sarah gasped as she finally understood what Billy had said. The graves of children—the two small children who had died of typhoid three years before. The Hillmans practically worshipped at the grave site. They took their other four children—the three girls of eight and three and two, and the little baby boy—to the site every Sunday, up above their cabin, and held worship in the open. Some folks said that Bertha and Claude Hillman had turned odd because of those children.

"The Hillmans come into town," Billy finally went on, as though briefing a company unit for battle. "Some men went out with Claude, and got the coffins sighted, and they're trying to get them to the bank. But the river is high."

"Want me to come?"

"Thought you best come into town," said Billy. "Feelings are rising high. Reckon they might have a rally at the courthouse. Martin Seidman is out with the men."

"I'll get my coat," said Lance.

"Wait—I'll come," Sarah got up and raced after Lance.

Both men looked at her in some surprise. "This isn't for women, Sarah," said Lance, sternly.

"Mrs. Hillman will need someone," said Sarah. "And maybe this is for women too. I'm coming."

She glared at Lance, and he frowned down at her. Billy waited, his face impassive.

"Well—okay, you come along, Sarah. Maybe it will do some good," he added, frowning again. "If any violence starts, you take the car and come right back here. Okay?"

"I'll see," she said.

They got their coats and went out to the car. Billy Glover started up his jeep and went ahead of them to the courthouse. Lance muttered when he saw the crowd.

The town was more packed than Sarah had ever seen it, except on game nights during basketball season. Men were milling around the general stores and the bars and

the courthouse, standing high and proud in the middle of the grassy town square. The old red brick building with the grotesque towers on the four corners had seen some strange sights, she recalled. Two men had been hanged in the square during the Civil War, for being suspected of spying. Another man had been convicted of murder, was about to be hanged, when his relations had come out of the hills on horseback, and carried him off to freedom. Several men had been shot down on that grass during the bitter feuding of years ago.

She was just thinking of the feuding when she caught sight of a man, standing alone, his rifle hanging down at his side, gripped loosely in his hand. It was Daniel Jameson, one of the worst of Lance's enemies. She caught her breath, and put her hand on Lance's arm.

"I see him," said Lance curtly. The man had turned his head and was looking at them. Lance did not look back. He moved the car into a parking space as close to the courthouse as he could get.

They got out and walked toward the crowd. Sarah bit her lips as she saw who was there. Parker Jameson, his brother-in-law Rory McCleary, who had married Cindy Jameson, Billy Glover, and his wife Elly May, Martin Seidman, Orson Bowman, Claude Hillman.

Sarah whispered to Lance, "Orson Bowman—"

"He's second cousin to Claude Hillman," said Lance. "I don't like this, Sarah. There's going to be trouble, I can smell it. All the Jamesons are out, and the Glovers. You git back to the house, come on, now."

She clung to his arm. "Lance, I don't believe it—" Then they heard a microphone. They stared ahead of them at the cement steps of the red brick courthouse. In the rounded center archway, several people were standing. Sarah could just make them out in the lights from the streets.

Donna and Jimmy Fox were at the mike. Adam Wisniewski stood behind them, somehow older and detached and watching. Martin Seidman was making his way through the crowd toward them.

There was a stir on the side of the courthouse; the crowd surged and swayed and parted, as some men came through, carrying two small pine boxes.

"The children—oh, my God," whispered Sarah, clinging

to Lance's arm all the harder. Lance began to make his way through the crowd to the front, shoving people aside quietly, deliberately, without much force. They would scowl and look behind to see who was shoving, then make way for him, dark faces without expression as they looked at Lance and at Sarah behind him.

The mike sputtered with sound, and came alive, as they reached the steps. The men had set down the small pine boxes on the steps in front of the microphone stand.

Jimmy Fox went up to the mike and said, quietly, "Folks, you came to see what was happening. Don't blame you. This is a sample of what the strip mining does. They don't give a damn about you, or your children, living or dead!"

Sarah's heart chilled as the crowd began to mutter in response.

"Those dozers, they come and wipe out the trees that God gave you two hundred years ago. They rip up the lovely green hills, and leave desolation! They make acid run red in the streams, and kill the fish, and cause no water to be fit to drink. And now this—it was deliberate, folks!" Jimmy's voice rang out dramatically. He seemed bigger than his small size that night, as Sarah stared up at him against the lights. "They were warned! The Hillmans told them they were getting court action against the dozing. But what did they do? The strip miners went right in, where they were forbidden to go, and they ripped and tore, and pushed—" His voice sank, and he pointed to the small pine boxes.

The crowd murmured in the silence.

"And they pushed—the graves—the coffins—of little William and Sarah Anne—from their peaceful resting place—down the slopes, the torn earth of that once-beautiful slope—into the red acid river—with the dead bodies of those two loved children—"

The crowd roared and drowned out his words. Sarah clung harder to Lance, feeling the blood draining from her body. They were getting caught up viciously into the mood of the crowd.

"Oh, stop, stop," she whispered, as though Jimmy Fox could hear her.

Martin Seidman went to the mike. "I think you would like to hear from the bereaved parents," he said, with his

quiet earnest voice. "They have something to tell you. Claude Hillman—"

He drew the man to the mike, the big hulking farmer in his faded overalls and thin coat hunched against the bitter November wind. The man looked about, as though dazed, his face gray and hard and vacant.

"Those kids, they never done anything," he began, in a monotone. "They never hurt nobody, just lying there in their graves. Little William, he was only two when he died. And little Sarah Anne, she was four, she had blonde curly hair and such a pretty laugh, you remember our Sarah Anne, she was always laughing. Sometimes you could hear her laughing in the trees at night, after she was lying in her grave, and I'd go out and call her and she would be giggling . . ."

Cold chills went down Sarah's spine. The crowd was staring up at the man, spell-bound.

"He's gone—crazy," Sarah whispered to Lance. He nodded, his frown worried.

Martin led Claude away from the mike hurriedly, as though he, too, realized the man was not sane. They moved Bertha Hillman to the mike. Donna Fox introduced her.

"You all know her—Mrs. Hillman—you tell them, Bertha. You tell them what you told the dozers."

Bertha was twisting her red work-worn hands together, staring out at the crowd, her face twisted with embarrassment and agony. "I told them—I went out and said to them, you must not touch the graves of my dear children. And they said, them is dead, they don't care. And I said to them, you're ripping my heart out of my body. And they said, we got our orders, ma'am. We got our orders to push them graves and the earth aside, and we're a-gonna do it, and they did it."

She hesitated, then bent her head, and sobbed, a loud heart-wrenching sob that echoed eerily about the silent square. Her matter-of-fact recital seemed to touch the very throbbing heart of the men and women standing and listening. Sarah put her face against Lance's shoulders, and tears streamed from her own eyes.

Donna put her arm about Bertha's shoulders, and whispered to her for a minute. The woman finally lifted her head, and continued.

"And I want to tell you, we done it all legal. We went to

court, and we asked for an order to restrain the dozers. And we got a lawyer, and we paid him legal. And they done it anyway."

Orson Bowman had fought his way up the steps to the stand. Tears streamed from his big flushed face, and he was not ashamed. He held up his hands, as the crowd murmured its anger.

"Folks, you know I'm for peace and all that. I'm the principal at the high school, and I believe in law and learning and education. I believe we got to strive upward and pull ourselves up, and you know what I believe. But folks—this is all too much! We tried it the legal way. We told the miners to quit ripping up our lands, and we begged them to let our cabins alone. And we went to court and said, get us laws against this. But who wins? The strip miners, that's who, because they got the politicians in their pockets! We can't win, because we got nobody up at the statehouse to fight for us. They don't want to listen to us, because we got no money to pay them to listen!"

"Yes—yes—that's right—that's right—" People were muttering, glaring up at the lighted stand.

Sarah thought of Caspar Dickey, coming humbly to talk to her father, for hours at a time, fawning over her at the dining-room table, flattering them with his compliments. Her father listening, with a cynical twist to his lips, saying to her later, "That politician. He's just like all of them. Well, he knows what I want, and he'll do what I tell him."

Now she was beginning to see what he meant. Her father and the other miners would get their way, because they bought the politicians. No laws strict enough would be passed, not while her father and the other miners could still buy power.

My father, she thought, incredulously, as she listened to other speakers. My father. Buying a politician, insuring that his views would be the way the state went. But not the graves, oh, God, not the graves.

Her father surely had not ordered the dozers to push those graves aside to get at the gleaming bands of black coal under the green earth. Her father was not heartless. He would never have ordered this. She glanced about the crowd anxiously. They would not believe her father would do this.

Lance was stiff, she could feel the tension in his body as she held his arm.

Franklin? No, he would not have done this. He must not have known. It must have been the dozers. The dozers. They might have a private feud going, she thought—and then she remembered Parker Jameson, the brother of Cindy Jameson, one of the infamous cruel Jamesons. He worked for the mine, he was a foreman, Franklin had hired him.

He might—he might—if the Hillman family was related to the Glovers. Busily, Sarah worked it out in her mind. Orson Bowman was third cousin to Lance. Bowman was second cousin to Claude Hillman. So that made Hillman on the Glover side, by the complicated reasoning of the mountains. If Parker Jameson had deliberately done this, it was for his own reasons. He meant to punish the Glovers indirectly.

But she must not say this out loud, she thought, her breath quickening. If Lance thought of it, she hoped he would not say it either. That could only cause more hurt, and the feud breaking out into the open again, and then no one would be safe.

Feuds were bitter, open running sores, once they got started. One shot, another was wounded, a child was hurt, and then there must be revenge, and on and on it went, until all of one side was gone. She knew that, it had happened before in Rivertown history. It had happened just before her birth, twenty-five years ago. One family had been mad because their daughter was pregnant by another enemy, and the enemy's family had refused to agree to marriage. Before the feud was over, the girl was dead, her baby was dead, her lover dead, two cousins, an uncle, a preacher who tried to settle it, all were dead, and one side wiped out completely.

Lance leaned to Sarah's ear. "Honey, we're getting out of here. I'll take you home."

She glanced back over their shoulders. "How?" she asked simply. The crowd was twice as thick now on all sides of the courthouse square.

He grimaced. "We'll get out somehow."

"Martin Seidman has something to say," said Jimmy Fox.

Martin came to the mike. "Folks, there is one practical

thing we can do for the Hillmans. I want volunteers to build new coffins tonight. We'll take out the little bodies, and rebury them in fresh new coffins, and say prayers over them. That will help. Then tomorrow, we will go out and try again to stop the strip mining. This town will never be a good town in which to live until the miners recognize the rights of the farmers and the cabin owners and the people to live in peace on their own lands."

"Where you going to bury them children?" a voice shouted. "Gonna bury them on that same slope?"

There was a long silence, then the crowd shouted. "Bury them on the slope—protect them—guns—rifles and shot-guns—we'll protect them this time—"

"No, no," Lance muttered, anxiously. Sarah was shaking with the tension in her.

"That would not be fair to the Hillmans," said Martin calmly. "No, folks, we'll bury them in the church cemetery, if that is all right with the family. Tomorrow, we will consult Claude and Bertha Hillman and do whatever they wish us to do. Now, I think we should go home, and think about this, and steel ourselves to the fight ahead—"

His last words were drowned by the crack of a loud ringing shot. The shot was followed by a second, and folks screaming, and dropping down into the grass of the courthouse yard. Sarah felt herself dragged down by Lance, and he held himself over her until it was quiet again.

A woman screamed, a piercing shriek right into the mike. Sarah shuddered in surprise and fear. Finally she lifted her head. "What—what—?" she stammered.

"The miners!" someone yelled. A woman's voice. "It's them dozers! They're coming, they're shooting—" Bertha Hillman was screaming right into the mike, her words echoing and carrying right through them, as though the hills themselves might hear her and scream with her.

"Donna," said someone. "Donna! Donna!" The words were another cry, from a man's voice.

Sarah and Lance got up, and pushed their way through the maddened crowd, the milling men and women, pushing and shoving their way past, until they were at the foot of the steps, and could see.

It was Donna Fox, sprawled down the steps, her ruana spilling down over the pine coffins. Donna was unconscious, and blood streamed from her throat and breast.

Jimmy was kneeling over her, his hands frantic. "She's been shot—shot—" he was yelling. "Donna—Donna—Donna—"

Martin came to kneel beside him, his face twitching with shock and grief and anger.

"What is it? Who—who—who was shot—" The mutter was going through the crowd. And the answer followed swiftly.

"Donna Fox, one of them anti-poverty workers. One of them people—one of them who spoke—the woman who gives out the pills—the woman who came—Donna Fox—she got shot—she's dead—she is dead—"

Sarah and Lance were halfway up the steps. They heard Martin say to Jimmy, "She is not dead. We'll have to get her to the hospital. Brace up, Jimmy, you have to help her now—Jimmy!"

But Jimmy, his face ravaged and shocked, kept repeating, "Donna, Donna, Donna, I never wanted you to get hurt—I was not afraid for myself—but you, oh, Donna—you wasn't to get hurt—my Donna—"

Chapter Six

Lance gripped Sarah's arm. "We'll get you out of here, then I'll come back," he was saying tensely. She shook her head.

"No, Lance, I can help." She pulled a little from him, and dropped to her knees beside the unconscious woman. She took out her handkerchief, pulled off her white scarf, and bent to see how serious the wounds were. Opposite her, Jimmy was rocking back and forth over his wife, his face twisted.

Someone knelt beside Sarah. She thought it was Lance at first, until she saw the large powerful hands with the black hairs on them. She glanced up, and saw the calm face of the Czech, Adam Wisniewski.

He took the handkerchief from her, and gently poked it into an open wound on the bared breast. Then his hands searched about the neck, located the other wound. Blood was flowing, spurting from it.

Without waiting for direction, Sarah took the scarf, and tied it. Adam took a ballpoint pen from his pocket, twisted the tourniquet. "Hospital, quickly," he muttered. The blood was slowing to a sluggish stream. Jimmy was sobbing, staring down at her.

Adam looked up at Martin Seidman. "She's bleeding badly, lost a lot. Can you get us through the crowd?"

"Yes," said Martin, tersely. He looked about, his cheek muscles twitching. Sarah got up, staggering a little, and looked about for Lance.

Then she saw the scene behind her. It was like a kick in her stomach, as she saw the men milling below her on the steps, spilling out on the grass.

Lance was fighting one of the Jamesons. The two were grappling, back and forth, so tensely they scarcely moved from the third step from the bottom. Oh, no, thought

Sarah, no, no—no—! Their faces were set, hard, in fighting grins, lips drawn back from their white teeth.

She stared at Lance's handsome face, and thought him an animal. His black hair was falling in his eyes, his tanned face seemed dark with his fury. One hand held the arm of his opponent in an almost loving grip, the other was at his throat. The other man held to Lance with one hand, and groped for his eyes, with gouging fingers.

Below them others fought. She saw Parker Jameson in a death-like grip with Billy Glover, the two un-matched. Billy was much smaller, almost like a boy in the grip of the other, but even Sarah's untrained eyes saw he was giving Parker trouble. There was something about the balance of the two figures, with Billy pressing forward, the other man falling back. A knife flashed, was kicked away.

She heard shouting, and looked still further. And saw her father, Neville Tallentire, his graying head held high. He was yelling something, furiously, his face flushed, his green eyes flashing angrily. He waved his hand imperiously, and two men came running toward him. Then he was lost in the crowd.

Franklin Tallentire appeared briefly, grinning, as he slugged a man whose back was to Sarah. The whole lawn seemed full of a chaos of men fighting, blindly, furiously, turning when one went down to attack another. She saw three men jump one, and he went down under the milling fists, the stamping of ruthless cruel boots.

She heard Martin Seidman's voice, insistently, and felt a hand on his arm. "Mrs. Glover, you must come—you must come—"

"Not without La-Lance," she stammered, and brought her fascinated gaze back to her husband's face. There was blood on one cheekbone. He was forcing his opponent down the steps now, cruelly, his knee in a groin, his fist slugging. And still he wore that fighting grin.

He was enjoying the fight!

Oh, hell, thought Sarah, wait till I get you home! He was enjoying it. Men! She started down toward him, furiously, instinctively, and was grabbed and held back by two men. Martin on one side, Adam on the other held her.

"No, you can't—you'll be killed—come back!" Martin was saying anxiously.

Adam murmured in her ear, "You must wait—come

with us—your husband can take care of himself, but he will not thank us to leave you here! Come, we will go through the courthouse, and out the back, they have unlocked—”

She stood firmly, refusing to be moved. “Not without Lance!”

He had slugged the Jameson man, and knocked him down the last steps, onto the grass. With a pounce he jumped on him, feet and arms flailing. The two rolled over and over, and were lost under the feet of others fighting near them.

The yelling deafened her. The screams of a woman went on and on, Bertha Hillman, screaming into the mike, shaking, her eyes glazed and maddened. Claude sat on the platform near her, in the chair where he had been put earlier, and stared blankly at the scene before him, as though he watched a television screen. It seemed to mean nothing to him. He sat there, and looked and gazed, blandly, insanelly.

“At least go back into the courthouse,” Martin was urging her. “We have to get Donna to the hospital—” He pulled her with him, Adam pushing from her other side. She kept glancing back, reluctantly, trying to find Lance in the crowd.

She saw him again, briefly, on his feet, his fist raised, his teeth bared as his lips were curled back. He was about to hit—and pow!—he did hit. The man before him went down. Lance plowed into the crowd. She was trying to see where he was going, and picked out the small crowd about a man.

The man was big and bearish, familiar. Orson Bowman! Burly and huge, shaking off the men attacking him like a sullen animal, his face bloody, the split grin on his face similar to the one on Lance’s face. Lance was fighting his way to him, made it, caught the shoulder of one of the men attacking Orson, pulled him back, slugged him so hard the crack was clearly audible to Sarah. She winced instinctively.

She backed to one of the huge white pillars, and remained stubbornly beside it. “You go on, I’ll wait for Lance.” She was half-hidden behind the still frame of Claude Hillman, sitting and rocking, slightly forward and backward, in his chair. “I’ll be all right here. They won’t come up. Go on. Get Donna to the hospital.”

Martin shrugged, and helped Jimmy lift Donna up. They began carrying her back through the courthouse. Blood dripped from her soaked ruana. Her head had fallen back against Jimmy's chest, her legs dangled as though lifeless.

Adam hesitated a moment longer, looked at her in his grave troubled manner, then nodded, and went on. She stood there, feeling alone and helpless, but unwilling to desert her man. She could not help him, but she would not leave him.

She jumped nervously when a hand touched her arm, and whirled about, to stare into the thin nervous face of Elly May Glover.

"I'll stay with you, if I may," said the woman simply. Sarah nodded, in relief, glad of her company. Elly May put her thin wiry arm about Sarah's waist, and they stood there, and waited.

There was a wave, a ripple at the edge of the crowd, as someone, several men, fought their way through to the edge.

"The sheriff," said Elly May. "Thought he was taking his time at coming." Her voice was cutting in its bitterness.

"Ephraim Halliwell doesn't take sides," said Sarah evenly. She stiffened a little in Elly May's arm. The woman paid no attention.

"More than one way of taking sides. Maybe he's letting them take off some steam. There—he's arresting—got three deputies with him."

To her shock, Elly May suddenly yelled, "Hey, sheriff! Hey, sheriff's coming!"

The figures below them on the lawn moved into new life. Some near the sides began running away, and soon the fight was narrowing down to some few small groups of men. Sarah saw Orson Bowman shake himself free from two men, like a bear weary of playing with cubs, and race awkwardly across and behind the courthouse.

A figure detached itself from the crowd, ran swiftly up the steps toward them. Sarah shrank back, from the bloody face and outstretched hand. But it was Lance.

"Come on, woman. Got to get us away. Billy's a-coming, Elly May," he said to his cousin. The strong damp hand gripped Sarah's strongly, so hard it hurt, and he yanked her with him back through the courthouse, along the bloody path where Donna had gone.

She turned back once, at the sound of footsteps pounding behind them. But it was Billy Glover, yanking Elly May along with him, the grin splitting his face. They passed Lance and Sarah, racing like the wind, down the steps on the other side.

Lance pulled Sarah along with him. "Crazy woman. Why didn't you go home?"

She panted for breath. "I wanted—to pick up the pieces—of you—and bury them!" she yelled angrily.

He laughed out loud, and pulled her along with him, his arm about her waist. She felt the heat in him, the sweat of his body, smelled the dank hot smell of the fight still coming from him.

They raced down the steps, and Billy and Elly May had already disappeared. Lance suddenly shoved her into the shadow of a tree near the back of the courthouse. "Wait there. Don't move!" he ordered.

And he disappeared. She waited, shivering in the darkness, reaction setting in. She was trembling, her knees weak, her arms cold, her hands freezing. "Oh, God," she whispered, "Oh, God!"

She had never witnessed anything like that in her life. The sheer mad fury of a crowd, the anger of men aroused, men she had known, some of them she had known all her life. And they had fought like animals, wanting to kill, to hurt, to maim.

A car pulled up suddenly beside her, and she jumped and shrank back. The door swung open.

A hand reached out toward her, a bloody hand. "Get in," said Lance. "Don't be all night!"

She got in, shivering again and again. He swung the car about, headed into a back street, out into the country. He was scowling at the road ahead, twisting the car into lanes, turning about.

"Great fight," he said, finally, as she was silent.

"Lance, I think—I hate you," she said slowly. "You were grinning. You were enjoying it!" She looked at him to refute the charge, to answer, to argue with her.

"Yep," he said. "Damn their eyes. Shot Donna. Damn cowards. Besides, I been wantin' to fight that Rory McCleary. The bastard."

She drew back into her corner, and stared out the window, her face away from him. The satisfaction in his tone

chilled her anew. Rory McCleary—who had married Lance's former sweetheart, Cindy Jameson. Why had he wanted to fight Rory McCleary—unless he still felt strongly about Cindy Jameson? Something cold from the chill night settled like ice into her heart.

She said nothing else on the way home, her mind churning. Lance was driving more slowly, scowling, his head swiveling from one side to the other, watching alertly when he drew near another car, peering at figures on the sidewalks.

They came to the house. He drove in, and they both noticed the two cars already parked at the garage.

"We'll go in the back and up the stairs," said Lance, and drew her with him. Inside the lighted kitchen, she saw someone's blood had stained her wool coat, and her own hands were red with blood. She shuddered.

"I'll get cleaned up and then get over to the hospital," he said, at the bathroom. He ripped off what was left of his jacket and shirt, and bent over the basin. He ran cold water over his hands, splashed them up his arms, bent his head, and put his face down into the bowl. He sputtered and ran water over his hair and face and the back of his head like a joyous bear.

She took off her coat, laid it on the bed, watched him in silence. Then as he dried himself, she went into the bathroom, opened the medicine chest, and took out salve. She studied his face, trying to be detached about it.

"How bad?" he said, peering into the mirror objectively.

"Scratches, one open running cut," she said. She put salve on his face.

He flinched. "Your hands are cold, Sarah." He took the salve from her. "I think one bandaid will take care of the cut."

She brushed against him to get at the bandages, and then stared at the fresh blood on her hands. "Lance—your side!"

He looked down at himself, at the open cut on his right side. "The bastard," he said, quietly, his lips thin. "Thought the bastard had a knife. He did."

She was shaking. She sat down on the edge of the tub. He didn't seem to see her. He opened the lips of the wound, examined it calmly. "I'll have to get sewed up at

the hospital. Put some bandaids on it to hold it closed, Sarah. Sarah?" he said again, as she did not move.

She put her face in her hands. He ruffled her hair with a strong hand.

"Brace up, honey. It's over," he said. When she could not move, he laughed. Laughed!

He put the bandaids on himself, ruffled her hair again, and went into the bedroom to put on a clean shirt. "I'll just check at the hospital, then come back," he said.

He came back to her, and stared at her still sitting on the tub. "You feel sick, honey?" he said, as though he were mildly interested in her answer.

"I'm all right," she said, dully.

"Okay. I'll be back pretty soon. Don't wait up."

He went down the stairs. She heard his heavy boots clattering on the bare stairs. She heard the car door slam. She sat, unmoving for a time, until she was ready to drop.

She got up, looked at her crumpled bloody dress. She took it off, washed her hands and face with cold hands. She put on a housecoat, and went downstairs again. She wanted some hot tea.

In the kitchen, she found her father. She stared at him as though he were a complete stranger. His hair was mussed, his eyes still angry.

"Sarah, I saw you there," he said, coldly. "What in hell did Lance mean, not taking you away?"

"He was too busy fighting," she said, too upset to be careful. "Damn it, he enjoyed the fight!" She slammed the teakettle onto the stove, and the water sloshed over the edge. She got out the tea, said, "Want tea or coffee, dad?"

"Coffee. Enjoyed the fight! That's like a hill kid! Damn it, I thought he loved you enough to take care of you." He sat down heavily on the kitchen chair, and sighed.

She compressed her lips to keep back her anger. She didn't mean to make more trouble between her father and her husband.

She fixed tea, and coffee for her dad. Then she toasted some bread and buttered it, and added peanut butter on hers. They sat munching and drinking in silence.

She was angry, hurt, scared—all mixed up. Why hadn't Lance thought first of protecting her, of taking her home? She might have been hurt. And fighting like that—enjoying

it—pounding viciously at other men, knocking them down, stamping them like—like a hill native!

Which he was.

She felt the shock still going through her. She had seen Lance as he really was, a primitive tough man, with hot fury and freely expressed passions. She had known with her mind he was tough, but he had always been tender and gentle with her. The shock of seeing the other side of him, the rough masculine aggressive side, the killer instinct, was a bad jolt.

Lance came in the back door so quietly they neither one heard him until he was standing there. His face was dark as he stared down at them. Sarah jumped up.

"Lance, did they fix up your side—Lance?"

"Donna is bad hurt," he said, very softly. "They just got her out of surgery. She lost a lot of blood. You satisfied, Tallentire?"

Sarah drew in her breath. Her father got up slowly, his graying head held erect.

"You don't have the gall to accuse me of starting that fight!" said Neville Tallentire, with the cold fury of the man who had fought all his life for his mines. "I had nothing to do with it!"

"You know who shot Donna. I'm figuring you know who's paying the killer too. Who is it?"

"Lance! Don't!" cried Sarah, in quick anguish, catching at his arm. "Dad would not—he did not—"

His arm was hard, unyielding as she tried to pull him away. He was staring at her father, his gray eyes hard with pain and fury. "I didn't think he would either, Sarah, or I would never have married you. Didn't think he was the kind to fight like that. Shooting at a woman, from ambush."

"You're not accusing me of any such—"

"Not the shooting. You're not that good a shot," said Lance, with calculated cruelty. "You're the guy who pays to have the shooting done. Right? Like the time five years ago at the Williams."

Sarah stared from one face to another, the faces of strangers, not the men she loved. She felt in a nightmare of horror. The fury in them had risen up, and she could not believe what she was seeing and hearing. The gentle safe life she had lived was wiped away as though it had

been scrawled on sand, and a wave had washed up carelessly, purposefully, and the writing was gone.

The chill that went through her was nothing like the earlier one. Then she had been physically afraid, for Lance and for herself. Now she was full of a strange new creeping horror—the horror of seeing persons turn into strangers before her eyes. She did not know these men. She did not know their potential for violence and murder.

"That was necessary," said her father, tautly. "Though I admit nothing. Williams was being stupid and stubborn."

"Fighting you, and your mining claims. Real stupid—real stubborn. So you wiped him out."

"I did not kill him," said her father, his face thinning, the cheekbones flushed. He glanced at Lance. "You dare to accuse me? In court? You'll find I was out of the state, and I can prove it."

"Your influence was not out of the state. It never left this area," said Lance. He shook off Sarah's paralyzing hand.

"Dad," Sarah whispered. "Lance—dad—say it isn't true! You don't mean—"

Both men turned to her, slowly, as though they had forgotten her. She thought that they had, and were still not fully aware of her presence.

"Your dad has been the power in this area for twenty-five years, Sarah," said Lance, in a hard tone she had rarely heard him use. "I thought, because he loved you, that he wasn't all that tough. But he is. He will kill when someone gets into his way. He has proved that several times. Haven't you, Tallentire?"

"It was never deliberate!" cried Neville Tallentire, angrily. "Because some men under me misunderstood their orders—"

"Oh, yeah, I've heard that one before, lots of times. We used to hear it in Vietnam." Lance's voice lashed viciously. His fists were clenched, his lips white. "You are responsible. You cannot evade that responsibility. If Donna dies, you are the killer, because you paid the killer—"

"I had nothing to do with that!" he cried proudly. "You can't lay that at my door! I don't fight women!"

"No? You don't fight women? What about Bertha Hillman and her dead babies?"

"Foolish sentiment! That land is valuable, it is rich with coal! And I have the long-form claims to it!"

Lance almost hissed. "Claims! God, you make me sick! You claim to be God-Almighty? You think you own that coal because you got a drunk miner to sign a paper thirty years ago? You think you can strip away their graves, and their cabin and their trees, and their memories, and rest easy at night? What kind of man are you? What kind of fool crazy—"

"No more, no more!" cried Sarah, in anguish. She stepped between them as her father raised his hand to strike, his face flushed with his fury. "No, no, you must not—please—you're both angry, you don't know what you're saying—"

"I know," said Lance, his voice like fire. "I was a fool myself. I believed the girl I married had a good father. Damn fool that I was. Blind." He strode out of the kitchen, leaving Sarah weeping.

Her father put his hands shakily on her shoulders. "Poor girl, poor child, I should never have agreed. Oh, God forgive me. I should have forbidden you the marriage—no matter how he deceived you—betrayed you—"

"Don't say that, don't say that, dad! You can't take back words once they are said!" She put her head on his shoulders, and let herself cry a few minutes, her slim body shaking with grief and pain.

Her father stroked her back soothingly, and she felt his own tension. Whom could she believe? She thought of her father as strong and good, a tough man, yes, but a good man. Lance's accusations had shaken the foundations of her faith. And Lance—what about him? Enjoying that fight, the way he had loved that fight. . . .

"You can make up the spare bed tonight, Sarah," said her father, shocking her into awareness of the present. She shook her head, like one coming out from under deep water.

"No, dad, I'm going up to Lance. He is my husband." She drew back from her father's arms, tried to smile at him. "We are all upset tonight. Tomorrow will seem better. We'll work it out, dad. Don't—don't look so—" Her voice broke, and she put her hand tenderly on his cheek.

He softened at once, and kissed her tenderly in return. "My Sarah, my girl, nothing must happen to you," he said,

as though thinking aloud. "I'll fix it so nothing happens to you, believe that, my girl. I never wanted you or Susan to be hurt, not ever."

She stiffened. He rarely spoke of her mother. It hurt him too much; her death after a long cruelly painful illness had been too much of a blow. "You must not worry, dad. Lance is a good man. We'll work it out," she repeated, not knowing how she could.

When she left the kitchen, she turned back once at the door to say good night. Then she stilled her words. Her father was sitting, staring vacantly into space, she was forgotten already. His face was hard and cold, his eyes a chill green.

She went to the stairs, and leaned against the post at the bottom. She didn't want to go up, but she didn't want to go back to the kitchen. Two strangers, she thought, and shuddered.

She put her face against her arm, and tried to still her fears. It is foolish, she thought, scolding herself again and again. These were her men, the men she loved, her father and her husband. Tonight, they were upset, saying things they did not mean.

But had her father killed, had he ordered killings, the way Lance said? Was he a—a murderer?

If he was, then her whole picture of him was a distorted mistake. Her father, in her mind, was a gentle good man, tough to outsiders, because mining was a tough business, but always good and kind to herself and her mother. Yet—yet—

She had heard the whispers and the rumors. In school, some girls and fellows had drawn away from her. She counted them over in her mind: the time when the farm on the hill had been taken over by her father for non-payment of taxes, and he had started stripping there; the time when Caspar Dickey had won the election to congress in the state, and the man who had run opposite him had left the state in a hurry; the time when he had taken his men and shotguns and the sheriff and deputies up into the hills, and gotten a moonshiner arrested, and then while he was in prison they had stripped his mine.

There were other times, and she brooded over them.

"Sarah, are you coming up?" It was Lance's voice, hard and cold, as it had never been to her.

She raised her head like a startled deer. "Yes, Lance, just now," she said, fighting to keep her voice steady. She mounted the stairs, came into the hallway, saw his face in the light from the bedroom, and fought back a little cry.

He had bandages on his face, he was naked to the waist, and a thick bandage was around his body. He looked, and was, tough, battle-hard. He was a complete stranger, as he looked at her with critical judging gray eyes.

He stood aside to let her into the bedroom, and closed the door after them. She had never been afraid of him before, she would not be afraid now, she thought, and went over to the dresser to remove her watch and bracelet.

"Your father convince you he was an angel?" Lance said, harshly. He sat down on the edge of the bed to remove his shoes and socks.

"No, Lance, we didn't discuss it any more. He is hurt, so am I, so are you. Let's not talk any more tonight, please."

She unzipped her dress, and took it off. She set it in the closet, beside the blood-stained one she had worn that evening. She should sponge the blood from it, she thought, but was too weary to do it that night.

He got into bed, the springs creaked. She was moving slowly, wearily, taking off her underclothes, putting on her thin nightdress, the white one with pink roses that he liked.

"It was true, you know, Sarah, what I said," came Lance's voice. She turned and looked at him. He lay on his back, his face upturned toward her, his big hands behind his head. She remembered that bloody hand outstretched to her, reaching out to her, and could not keep from shuddering involuntarily at the memory. She had taken that hand, the hand of her husband.

"Let's not—discuss it—Lance, please," she said, faintly. She turned out the light, and got into bed on her side.

She lay tensely, waiting to see if he would try to make love to her. She could not yield tonight, for she was too upset. Yet she must not resist him. He grunted, turned on his side, his back to her, and lay there quietly.

She knew when he slept. But she could not sleep. She lay with her eyes closed, willing herself desperately to rest and drift off. But she could not. Midnight came, and one o'clock, and two o'clock. She heard the clock chiming on the courthouse and thought of the scenes of fighting all

over again. She lived again through the nightmare of the shots, and the blood streaming from Donna, and the white handkerchief and the white scarf turning crimson in Adam's big capable hands.

She shivered again and again, and drew up another blanket to cover her. She finally drifted off, because she did not hear the clock striking three. But she heard it again at five, and at six, and finally got up.

Her eyes were heavy with tears and lack of sleep. She washed her face in cold water again and again, fighting the knowledge of the meaning of her life since last night. She could no longer trust the only two men in her life who mattered to her. They were men she did not know or understand.

She saw her father before she left, and he was drawn and haggard, and it hurt her heart. Lance drove her to school in silence. His face was puffy this morning, his scratches and the cut quite evident. She had asked him about his side, and he had been curt. The surgeon had stitched him up fine, he said.

They taught, returning home after a rough day. The students were excited and restless; everyone knew what had happened. A relative of the Jamesons in Sarah's class had been aggressively rude, and another boy had been on the verge of fighting him. Sarah had stopped the fight before it had a chance to get started, and both boys sat in sullen silence.

At home that evening, the meal was more than uncomfortable. The atmosphere was hostile. Franklin was not there, for which Sarah was grateful. He was working late at the mine office, her father said.

Lance went back to work on his lesson plans. Sarah lingered to speak to her father.

"We must forget what was said last night, dad," she said, with gentle firmness. "We were all upset. You know we were. Lance didn't mean half what he said, and you—"

"Yes, he did. He called me a murderer!" her father flashed. "Your husband has turned on me, as I might have known he would! He is a Glover, through and through, and I was a fool to forget it!"

"Oh, dad, please don't!" she begged, near tears, but fighting it. She would not show weakness, if she could

help it. "He is my husband—and I love him, as I love you also. I don't want the two of you to quarrel."

Her father turned on her, and she knew he was hurt, because he had never spoken to her this way before. "You would date him, you would get yourself involved with him. This would never have happened, if you had listened to me, Sarah! No, you are willful, and you had to go out with that Glover man, because he intrigued you, he flattered you. You thought you could handle him! Well, you can't. He is a Glover, a hill boy, full of their passions, and hate. He hates me, and he'll hate you too someday!"

"Oh—dad!" She whispered, sickened. He left the room. She finally got up, and went up to her bedroom, and cleaned the bloodstains off her dress, an excuse not to go back to Lance.

She couldn't face anyone tonight, she thought. She could not look at them, and know what was inside them.

Chapter Seven

Lance had basketball practice the next afternoon, so they drove in separate cars to school. Sarah had been thinking until her brain was weary. She could not find a solution, only more problems.

She decided to go to the hospital that afternoon, and see how Donna Fox was coming along. She drove there in the bright sunlight. The dark coolness of the hospital corridors was a shock and so was the strong smell of antiseptics and medicines, which always run through a hospital. She had always disliked and feared hospitals, though her rational mind told her they were the right place to be when one was ill or hurt.

She went to the reception desk, inquired for Donna, was told she could not have visitors, but was gradually improving. As she turned slowly from the desk, Martin Seidman came up to her. His dark shrewd face was studying hers.

"Mrs. Glover? You here about Donna?"

"Yes. Have you seen her?" She moved a little away from the desk, and murmured ruefully, "I never trust these impersonal reports! Sorry!"

His grin flashed for a moment, then his lean face was serious again. "Yes, I've seen her." He hesitated. "Would you have coffee with Adam and me? I was just headed to his place. Lance busy?"

"Basketball. Yes—I would like to," she added on impulse. Martin was a strong man, a sane man, a pillar, she thought, and so was Adam. She could talk to them, and maybe she would get her mind straightened out again. She felt almost feverish with her doubts and fears of her father and Lance.

Martin walked beside her out to the parking lot. They

both saw the looks they got from people on the way—cool, appraising, studying both of them, together.

"You're being judged," he said quietly. "You'll be considered on our side if you keep on being seen with us, you know."

"I'm not taking sides," she said hotly. Then she sighed. "Yes, I am, I can't help it. But my father is a mine owner, you know. I can't help either that I am Sarah Tallentire."

"Sarah Tallentire Glover," he said, and opened his car door. "Want to come with me, or drive?"

"I'll drive, then you won't have to bring me back for my car." She got in, then followed his car, as he turned, and drove out of the lot. He drove through town slowly, glancing back at her from time to time to make sure she was following.

He pulled up in front of a shabby white house, the paint flecking, the weeds high in the yard. No one paid much attention to the well-being of this house, she thought, they were probably too busy at their work.

Adam came to the door to greet them, surprise and pleasure in his round face. "Come in, come in, Mrs. Glover. How nice that you come to us!"

She smiled at him, remembering how strong and capable he had been the night of the riot. "I meant to thank you for what you did the other night, Mr. Wisniewski. Taking care of Donna, so very well."

"If you will please to call me Adam, I will then believe we might be friends," he said, with a little shy smile. He held out his hand, and she put her small one timidly in his big one. He held it as he might have a fragile glass, and let it go again.

"And my name is Sarah," she said.

"I'll fix the coffee. Let me see—how much do I put in," said Martin, peering at the coffee can.

"Would you be insulted if I asked to make the coffee?" asked Sarah, pertly, with a laugh.

"I should be much relieved if you would," said Adam. "I cannot make coffee any better than Martin, and neither can Jimmy. Donna looked after us all."

There was a little silence. Sarah made great work of putting the coffee in the pot. Martin got out cups and saucers, some dry crackers, then some peanut butter.

These men, she thought, with pity, they can't really take care of themselves.

Then she remembered the efficient way Adam had taken care of Donna's injuries. After she had set the pot on the stove, she said to Adam, "You must have had medical experience, Adam."

He was sitting in a big armchair in the large combination living room-dining room. The small stove and cupboards were at one end of the room.

"In Czechoslovakia, we all learned this," he said. "We could not go to the doctor when we were injured, because it would have been reported at once to the police. So we learned to take care of each other."

"Why did you leave?" she asked, quietly.

"I was betrayed," he told her, his face saddening. "It is hard to keep one's silence under torture, I understand that. But he was one of my best friends. Later, he died. I pray to find forgiveness in my heart for him. Two of us gone, killed. Three others left the country. I was lucky, I came to America."

She felt shaken to the depths. A lifetime of suffering in a few words.

"No more of that, Adam. We have other things to plan," said Martin, with jarring briskness. She caught his look at Adam, and knew why he acted so. "Sarah—Donna is coming along as well as can be expected. She still lapses into unconsciousness, she is still having intravenous feeding. Jimmy is there night and day. But I think she is going to pull through, I feel it in my bones. She is a strong woman, with guts. She'll make it."

"I'm glad of that," said Sarah. The coffee perked, she poured it out, and watched the men drink and eat hungrily. Then quietly, she began to prepare some bacon and eggs. They were very hungry. When they had all eaten their fill, they sat back and sighed, then laughed.

"I really did not ask you here to cook for us, Sarah," said Martin, comically, pulling a face. "But you are very good to do it, right, Adam?"

"She is good cook, good woman," said Adam. "I feel fine!"

They all chuckled. "I should go," said Sarah. "Lance will be coming home in an hour or so."

"Lance. He is a fine man," said Martin, thoughtfully.

"With passion, and loyalty. I like to fight on his side, eh, Adam?"

"Yes. He makes good resistance fighter," said Adam.

Sarah flinched, and burst out, "You men! I wish you wouldn't talk about fighting all the time. Don't you know how Rivertown is? All their feuding and their fights—they are always ripe for trouble!"

Martin and Adam both seemed surprised. "But all life is a fight," said Adam, spreading out his big hands widely. "All life. I have always found it so. If one does not fight, one loses by—how do you say that, Martin?"

"Loses by default," said Martin, rubbing his chin, and looking thoughtfully at Sarah. "Do you mean to close your eyes, and say everything is rosy and beautiful? Do you think that makes it so?"

"No, of course not!" She felt quite confused, and tried to sort out her thoughts and speak reasonably. "I mean—it does no good to fight about it. Violence doesn't help, it just makes things worse. I have been thinking—you know, one of the big troubles is that when the miners are injured they have no work to do. They aren't trained for anything else, they rarely go to school very long. They drink, fight, stir up trouble, and their families take it up."

"Right. And they head for the women, and make them pregnant, start another family they can't support," said Martin, practically.

She flushed, a little shocked at his bluntness. "Yes, that also. Although it is the young girls who trouble me, the girls of fourteen and fifteen who have to drop out of school. But I have been thinking— isn't there something they could learn to do? The ex-miners need work, and some of the girls, who have been deserted and have children."

The men looked at each other, then at her.

"Do you have something in mind?" asked Adam, slowly.

"Well—" She spread out her hands in an imitation of his manner, vaguely aware of how she had caught his mannerism, but too intent to think of it. "I thought about some crafts. We do have tourists, you know. They come to see the Appalachian mountains, and stay at some of the resorts. There is one fifteen miles away that is popular. Isn't there something they can make—something in wood, maybe? Carving? Don't all the hill people carve?"

Adam scratched his head. Martin leaned back in a chair and closed his eyes, looking like an intent scholar pondering a theory rather than a political activist. She thought he seemed very Jewish at times, intense, intellectual, passionately a man of ideas, rather than the man of action she had seen. She could see him as an old man, perhaps with white hair and a white beard, studying a book intently, giving out wisdom gained through the years. She smiled a little at her thought.

"Clay," said Adam suddenly, and Martin flicked his eyes open wide. "I have seen some good clay."

"In the hills, yes. Veins of it," said Martin. "You have, haven't you, Adam?"

Adam nodded his head, with more excitement. "Yes, I have done much with pottery, taught it, loved it. The clay is good. It could be fired to a rich golden brown. Or it could be painted, or glazed. We would need kilns. A place to work, a large bare room."

"Here?" asked Martin, looking about alertly, at the huge shabby room, the piles of cushions on the couches and the overstuffed armchairs, the stove and refrigerator.

"No, unless we have to. If we could hire a large hall—several rooms—"

"Clay, pottery, making art pottery?" asked Sarah, eagerly. "Is this something they could learn to do?"

"If they have the skill," said Adam. "Or art glass. There is a market for glass. Hum. The simpler shapes, something from nature. People are fond of birds, flowers."

They sat and thought, began speaking at once, in great excitement. The more they thought, the more practical it seemed.

They could rent a large building, hire girls and examiners, get large plain tables or make them, or have the miners make them. The big expenses would be the kilns and the rent for the building. Martin got out a pad of paper and began figuring busily. He thought he might be able to manage it financially, but Adam looked troubled, and rubbed his chin. Sarah knew they could not.

"Why not leave the money-raising to me for the time being," she finally offered. "I have to go—oh, goodness, Lance will be home and wondering where I am." She got up. "Let me think about the money problem, I think I know where I can raise some. You concentrate on finding

the hall, and which ones can do the work, and getting people interested."

"I think we had best find out first whether we can raise the money," said Martin, gently. "I don't want to raise false hopes. They have had hopes dashed too often, to take any more disappointments."

She looked into his kind brown eyes, and nodded. "Yes, you're right. I'll let you know as soon as I can figure out something." She left. Martin escorted her to the car, and watched her out of sight. Adam waved from the doorway, his big hand opened wide.

She went home, full of enthusiasm. She went directly to her father in his study, though Mrs. Wilson warned that dinner was about ready.

"Oh, dad, I've had an idea," she said, eagerly.

"What? Leaving Lance?" he asked, harshly.

"Oh, no, no, of course not! Oh, have you seen him, isn't he home yet?"

"He came home—if you can call this his home! When you weren't here, he went into one of his rages, and walked out. Good riddance."

She gasped, staring at her father. "Lance—left?" she asked weakly. She felt gripped with pain. "Oh, dad, no."

He relented a little. "Oh, he probably just went out to get drunk," he said. "These hill people, you know! Don't worry, you won't get rid of him so easily."

"Dad!" She was near tears, and turned to leave the room.

He caught her arm, pulled her back. "I'm sorry, baby. I shouldn't say that. He'll come back." He smoothed her blonde curls. "What was your idea? You didn't say."

Mrs. Wilson called them to supper. Franklin did not come, nor did Lance. Sarah sighed, worried about her husband, then finally concentrated on telling her father the idea.

At first he could not comprehend what she was talking about. "Clay factory? What in hell do you want with a clay factory? You want to quit teaching?" He stared at her incredulously.

"No, no, dad! I want some work for the injured miners to do, and some of the girls who aren't married and have children," she said eagerly. "Adam said—"

"Who is Adam?" he barked, a scowl gathering on his face.

She reminded him patiently who Adam was, and Martin. He listened in intense and belligerent silence as she went over the idea again. Finally he finished his coffee, and said, "No."

"Dad? What do you mean?" She was genuinely bewildered. Her father rarely refused her anything. "Do you realize what it would mean to the men to work again? They wouldn't get into fights. . . ."

"I said no! I mean no! I'm not going to pay for those damn radicals to thumb their noses at me! Sarah, do you honest-to-God think I'll help them one little finger's worth? I'm a miner! I'm no damn welfare worker! I've worked hard all my life, and nobody ever handed me anything! I fight for what I want. I work. Damn it, I work!"

She stared at him. "But dad, these people can't work in the mines, they are crippled—handicapped—with small children—"

"I'm sick of paying for people who won't help themselves! The government seems to think we people who work will pay forever for those who can't work—all they can do is raise more stinking brats they can't take care of!"

"Dad! Please listen to me!"

He got up and left the room, his feet stamping on the floors of the hallway. She finally got up and went out to the kitchen to Mrs. Wilson.

"There now, child, why do you fight with your father at the dinner table? You want him to get ulcers?" asked the woman, a little scolding. "And where is your husband?"

"I don't know." Sarah sat down at the kitchen table, propped her chin on her hands and brooded. "Oh, Mrs. Wilson, do you sometimes think the whole world is in a big mess?"

"Nope. Sometimes I think human beings can get themselves into a mess of trouble, though," she said, with a little wise chuckle.

The back door slammed shut. Sarah looked up to see Lance glaring down at her. "Where the hell have you been? I've been looking all over town for you, including the hospital!"

"Oh—Lance," she said, weakly. She saw the ominous look on his face, and quavered, "I went to see Donna—but they wouldn't let me in. Then I went to talk to Martin and Adam. The time went faster—I'm awfully sorry!"

"You could have phoned," he roared. "Did you want me to think you were dead? Why the hell didn't you let me know? Why didn't you phone Mrs. Wilson? Even your dad didn't know where you had gone!"

He sat down beside her at the table, and ruffled her hair with a heavy hand. She saw the worry draining out of his face, and leaned against his shoulder. "I'm sorry, honey," she whispered. "I didn't think."

"I should beat you," he said, without anger now. He put his arm about her shoulders. "God, I'm starved to death, and you sit here and look like an angel. I must have been out of my head worrying about you!"

"I'll get you some supper." She pulled away, jumped up, and went about fixing some hot meat and vegetables. Mrs. Wilson poured coffee and set it in front of him. Sarah set some biscuits and honey beside him, said, "Supper will be ready in five minutes."

"Sure, sure, feed the beast and he'll forgive you anything," said Lance. She looked at him, and saw the wicked twinkle in his eyes, and grinned back at him. He lit into the biscuits and spread butter and honey lavishly.

He ate hungrily, and she sat beside him and they talked about school, tactfully leaving the subject of Martin and Adam until later. When they were settled in their joint study, and correcting papers he finally asked, "What did you want to see Martin and Adam about?"

"I thought they might be able to figure out something, some work for the miners." She told him about the idea, added, "But it will be expensive. I don't know if we can swing it or not. We'll have to get someone to back it financially."

"There goes a great idea," he said, drily. "People with money don't hand it out to charity." He shrugged. "Your dad could, but I don't suppose he would."

She kept her face stilled. She would not confess that she had already asked him, and had a strong rebuff.

They worked on their papers, then went up to bed. She undressed and slid into bed with a sigh. He came to bed, turning out the lights as he came.

He moved into the bed beside her, moved to take her into his arms. Gratefully, she curled closer to him, glad that their quarreling was done. She would forget all her mean thoughts about him, she resolved. He was a strong

and passionate man, but she was not right to think he would be violent and mean and murderous. She had been tired and confused.

He leaned over and kissed her mouth, their lips lingered, with the growing passion and awareness that had been building up between them. The more weeks they were married, she thought, the more they became accustomed to what would please the other in lovemaking. He knew what she liked now, and he gave it to her, except when he held back teasingly.

He brushed his lips over and over her cheek, and jawbone, and up to her ears, and down to her throat. Then he drew nearer to her breasts, opened the nightdress and began kissing her where she loved it, right on the nipples and around the breasts, and beneath them. She held him close to her, her hands tightening convulsively on his bare shoulders and he could feel the passion rising in her. He bit lightly on one nipple, holding it between his lips, and tonguing it. Her hips lifted involuntarily, and she tried to push herself closer to him.

He knew the signs in her now. He lifted the nightdress, and slid it off over her head. She was warm, impatient, even with those moments lost. She slid back into the warmth beneath his body, and held onto her arms. He came down to her, his hands sliding over her breasts, down to her waist, down to her thighs.

He came between her legs, and there was a sweet tormenting time while he teased her and played with her. He liked to build her up, he had told her, so that when he came to her, she was so hot she grabbed him and was wide open for him. Sometimes she resolved to pay him back for his teasing, and refuse him for a while, but after he had done this, she was so ready she could not stop herself or him.

It was that way tonight. He teased her affectionately with his hands, then with his body, moving on her slowly, turning this way and that, until she had to grab him and whisper to him.

"Please, please, Lance—oh, I am ready—oh, honey, honey—"

"What do you want, darling?" he asked, in mock surprise.

"You know—you know—"

"Tell me."

She told him, impatiently, pulling at his shoulders, sliding her small palms down his back and up again to his head. "Honey—honey—please—"

"Well—just because I'm sorry for you—all worked up—and no place to go—" And he chuckled wickedly, and thrust all at once, so she cried out in pleasure, and thrust up wildly in response to meet him.

Then there was no talking for a while, only the delicious movements, and his hard breathing in her ear. The world blurred for a time, nothing meaning anything at all, except his warm body pressing on hers, his kisses, and the hold of his hands, and her burning body being satisfied gloriously.

He finished and lay back, his head on her arm, his body lax. She lay quietly until her breathing had slowed, and the pounding of her heart had eased. She drew the covers over them, for the nights were chill now. She turned to lie with her face against his shoulder, and she pressed her lips to the flesh she loved.

"You're my darling, my wife," he murmured, out of the silence.

"Yes, yes, and you are my love," she replied.

"No matter what happens."

"No matter what happens." He turned again to her, and his hands began moving as urgently as before on her. She responded, a little troubled by his need, but too happy and too dazed to question it that night.

Chapter Eight

Things went better for Lance and Sarah during the next few days. They began discussing tentatively the ideas of the work projects, especially the pottery and glass. Lance liked the ideas, she could tell. He kept turning them around and around in his mind, coming out with more ideas.

He thought the resort gift shop would accept items for sale. He knew the woman who ran it. She was always back in the hills, getting the hill people to make more items, suggesting things, urging them to invent designs which would be attractive to the tourists, yet little works of art in themselves.

They kept coming back to the same problem—money. They had pared to the bone the amount needed, and it was still large. It would take all her inherited money, Sarah thought, the money her mother had left to her.

Once that idea had come to her, it refused to leave. She was young and strong, Lance was a good worker. Why should she keep money in a savings account when it could be useful, help people? She didn't need the money, she never touched it.

Finally she told Lance about it. He protested at first.

"That is your nest egg, honey. You didn't even need to tell me about it. Why shouldn't you keep it?"

"I feel selfish," she said honestly. "I feel guilty. I have so much, a good job, my health—and a husband to look after me. Even when I—I have to quit work—" She blushed at the look he gave her.

"You pregnant yet, honey?" he asked. She wasn't sure if he was calmly curious, or hopeful.

She shook her curly head vigorously. "Not yet, Lance. And I do hope it will wait until the school year is over, at least. Anyway—we both work, and when I quit, you can support us both, we know that."

"Sure. Well—let me think about it." He thought about it, in his calm methodical way, and a couple days later, he told her he thought it would be a good idea, if she still wanted to do it.

She did. They went to Martin and Adam, and simply told them they had the money to begin the project. The men were surprised, and very excited. Adam at once spoke of a kiln he could get second hand from back East. They would start with one, then buy another when they could.

Martin had been looking at an empty building away from the houses in town, which would do for a factory. It was huge, but the rent was cheap, because no one else wanted the building. Martin rented the building at once. Adam went back East, and soon returned with what looked like an enormous kiln. He was immensely pleased with it, and patted it as though it were a favorite child.

Lance went to several men he knew were out of work, and desperate. He persuaded them to come and try to make clay pots, under Adam's instruction. Lance and Sarah stopped in after school the first day, and felt discouraged. Two men had quit already. Adam was working with the other three, patiently showing them again and again how to turn the potter's wheel, how to shape the clay with their bare hands. Then he would take the clay off, mold it again, and ask them to start over.

Martin talked to them. Lance said bluntly, "Why did the others quit?"

Martin said, "They might come back, but they didn't have the talent these do. Maybe they'll come back and work the kiln. There'll be more manual labor, when the trays of clay pottery go in and out. I asked a couple of girls to come, but they were dubious—didn't trust me. Will you see them, Lance?"

"Sure, give me their names." Lance accepted the slip of paper, glanced at it. "Okay. I'll get them here tomorrow."

Sarah felt discouraged because the clay pottery being turned out was rough, ill-shaped, and crude. She didn't want to say it aloud, but no one in his right mind would pay for these objects.

Adam saw her looking at the objects, and drew her aside. "Do not worry, Sarah. They have talent, and it will take a little time. At first, I will reshape what they do, and

show them how it should be done. Within two weeks, we will have something good to sell. You can help us."

"How can I? I know nothing of the crafts."

"Will you find some books with designs in them? Or do you know someone who can draw well? We could hire a staff designer, who will draw for us."

"Jeannie Frasier," said Sarah, at once, with inspiration.

"Who is she?" Lance came up in time to hear the question.

"Jeannie? She is crippled, takes in sewing to make a living. What about her?" he asked, his face taking that hard defensive look when his hill people were mentioned.

"Can she draw designs?" asked Adam. "We need some fresh ideas for designs for the pottery."

Lance rubbed his hand through his thick black hair, and pondered. "I don't know. Want me to ask her? And what kind of designs you want?"

"Something to draw on the clay, in color. The glaze may be a deep blue, so the design would be in white or in red or cream. Something simple that will show up, not too complicated."

Lance and Adam agreed to go see Jeannie, and so that part of the project began. Jeannie could not move from the house, but she was eager to help, and the idea of using her talents and being paid for them was appealing. Her little face shone as Sarah turned to say good-bye.

In the car, Sarah said to Lance, "Oh, I do hope this all works out! So many people are having hope built up in them. If it is dashed—oh, Lance, it will be horribly cruel."

"They have lived on hope alone for years," he said, grimly. "One more time of having lost won't kill them. But I hope too that it works out." He reached out a long arm, and pulled her closer to him as he drove along slowly. "Have I told you lately that I love you?"

"Not very recently," she said demurely, snuggling up to him. "I'm sure it has been at least twelve hours. Why haven't you said a thing?"

He pulled into the driveway beside the house, and parked near the garage. He pulled her close to him, put his mouth on hers, and kissed her so hard her lips stung for an hour.

Franklin was in for dinner. The gloom at the table was heavy, and no cheerful chatter from Sarah about minor

school doings did anything to dispel it. As they drank their coffee, her father turned to her. He was frowning.

"Sarah, I would like to see you alone after dinner. In my study," he said, curtly.

She saw Lance put his head back like a balky horse, the flush high on his cheekbones. She said quickly, "Why, yes, dad, there's something I wanted to talk over with you also. Lance, you'll be in the study later, won't you?"

He looked at her, his gray eyes remote again. "Yes, sure."

Franklin was looking odd and triumphant—smirky, she thought. She wondered what he was up to, but was not long in doubt.

In the study, her father sat down heavily at his desk. She sat opposite him, in a comfortable chair, feeling oddly like a girl being sent to the principal for punishment. She wondered what she had done—lately—to deserve it.

"Sarah, I have had word from the savings bank that you have withdrawn all your funds. What about it?"

She stiffened, stared at him. She felt rash anger rising up in her, and tried to repress it. It would not help to blow up at her father.

"They had no right to inform you, dad," she said, evenly, her hands clenched in her lap. "I am twenty-five. The money is clearly mine."

"I asked them, demanded an answer. What fool thing has Lance done, that you have to bail him out? Or has he persuaded you to squander the money your mother left you on some damn stupid project?"

"Neither one. It was my idea. You would not finance the pottery works, so I am," she said, quite simply and clearly.

Their eyes met for a long moment. Father looked at daughter, and daughter at father, as though they were enemies.

"You went against my judgment," he said slowly. "I told you it was a no-good project. You can't help these people. It's pouring good money down a rat hole."

"I don't happen to believe it," she said, thinking of Jeannie's radiant face. She was so thin, so frail. Her sewing had quite worn her eyes, and she could never have enough to make any kind of living at it. She didn't eat enough, hard as she worked. "They would rather have

work, and do a good job, earn their own living, than take handouts from the government, I know that."

"I don't know that. I know otherwise! They are weak, foolish, feckless people who can't hold on to a dime! They will take all your money, they have taken all your money! You will be left without a penny, and they will be right back where they started! I know their kind! They used to have some gumption, but they started taking handouts in the depression, in the thirties. They have never worked since! Why should they? Why work, when a damn fool government will pay you for not working!"

He got up and paced back and forth across the rug, his anger growing with his words.

"Years and years of no working," he said darkly. "I know. I have gone to them, offered them work. Why, that damn fool Hawkins, when he was injured, I offered him work sweeping around in the mine office, doing some light janitor work! He refused me! Refused! Now he goes out and drinks up the pension he gets!"

"Maybe he didn't want janitor work," she said, quietly. She clenched her hands tighter and tighter. She had not seen her father like this often, but her mother had had a job soothing him when he worked himself into such a rage. "He is—he has artistic ability, Adam says. He has designed some good shapes in the clay—"

"Oh, sure! Playing! He would be good at that. He was always playing in the mines, drawing pictures on the walls! That was how he got injured! Not paying attention to his work! Served him right, I told him so at the hospital!"

She closed her eyes as he raved on. Her father had gone to an injured miner in the hospital and told him it was his own fault! No wonder Hawkins had refused the job. Oh, dear God, she thought, is this what her father was really like? Was he the kind of man who would be so cruel? Evidently he was, and she had never really known him.

The pain was coming back, the dull hurt of the pain of seeing a loved person in a different light. Was Lance so different also? Different from the man who held her so tenderly and whispered lovely words to her in the darkness, and stroked her body with gentle loving hands, and told her she was silkiness and fire?

Her father was still raving, when the door opened. Franklin Tallentire came in, grinning. "I heard the fight

down the hall, thought I would join in," he said, impudently.

"You young puppy!" her father raged at him. "Get out!"

Franklin put up his hand. Sarah saw it was still dirty from coal dust, though he had washed. There were dark lines of dirt under his long fingernails. "Hear me out, Uncle Neville. I warned you about this. Told you she would do what her husband asked. Now it has come to all her money, and it's too late to rescue that. But you can cut off her allowance for now. It would be too bad to add to the money Lance Glover is collecting from her!"

Sarah jumped up. Such unwarranted interference made her see red. "I haven't had an allowance since I was in college, for your information, Franklin!" she said, furiously. "I earn my own way. The money in the bank is mine to do with as I choose, I earned it, I'll spend it as I think best!"

"Not your mother's inheritance," her father reminded her drily. "That was left to you on my request! And you have spent it all on some damn fool project. Neville is right. I think I had better change my will. If I'm found dead some night, young Lance Glover isn't going to get the mines too!"

She gasped, kicked in the guts. She glared at him incredulously. "Dad," she whispered. "You wouldn't say—you wouldn't think—oh, no, you must not say such things—"

The two men were staring at her with the impersonal curiosity of strangers. She turned and ran out of the room, near tears. She felt too weak to go to Lance. She paused in the living room, wiped her face, brushed back her hair, sat down to gather herself together. She felt crushed. She and her father had always been so close, so sympathetic.

And now he thought so little of her judgment, so little of herself, that he would change his will to avoid letting her get the mines! What would he do?

She thought she knew. He would leave the mines to Franklin.

But to think he would accuse Lance in so many words of wanting to kill him, of planning to kill him! That was what her father had meant!

She clutched herself and shivered. Where was she going?

What was she going to do? There was nothing she could do, she didn't know any answers, only the questions.

Mrs. Wilson came quietly into the room. "Sarah, honey, you're wanted on the telephone. What's wrong?"

Sarah had shuddered at the unexpected voice near her. She opened her eyes, stared blankly at the kindly housekeeper.

"Oh—I—quarreled with dad again," she said, bleakly. "Did you say the telephone?"

"Yes, dear. Poor child. What a honeymoon you are having, to be sure!" Mrs. Wilson patted her shoulder as Sarah went past her.

The voice on the phone was shy, unfamiliar, a woman's. "Mrs. Glover? This is Mrs. Jones, next-door neighbor to Jeannie Frasier. She don't have no phone. She says, tell Mrs. Glover I got some designs for her to see. If she wants to come over."

"Oh designs—oh, that's fine. Do you think we could come over this evening?"

The voice warmed, became more friendly. "Sure, Mrs. Glover. She always alone, and she don't sleep much. You come on over."

Sarah went back to the study, quietly entered. Lance did not hear her at first. His head was on his hands, he was bent over the table, his eyes closed, looking so tired and lost that her heart went out to him.

She came up to him. He lifted his head alertly, the blank look shuttering his face, closing out all expression. His gray eyes looked up at her.

"Lance, Mrs. Jones phoned, next-door neighbor to Jeannie Frasier. Jeannie has some designs for us to see. I would like to go over this evening. Would you—come with me? Or are you too busy?"

"No, I'm finished," he said, and got up at once. "What did your dad want? To tell me to get out of his house?"

"No, we quarreled over something else. Lance, I hurt over it. I want to get away for a couple hours. Forget all about it." She held out her hand appealingly to him, and he took it at once.

"You can't tell me about it?" he asked, holding her hand strongly, warmly.

"I don't want to, not now. I want to forget. Let's go see Jeannie."

"Okay, honey." He put her coat around her shoulders, and they went out the back, through the kitchen. Mrs. Wilson smiled at them and went on with the dishes.

In the car, Lance said, "You're mighty fond of your dad, aren't you?"

"Yes. I thought—he never showed the hard side to me, Lance. I knew with my mind that he was tough—he had to be to run the mines. But I never—he never acted—toward me—" She choked, the sob catching in her throat.

"Come over here." He drew her closer to him, so she sat next to his body, thighs touching, as he drove. The contact was soothing to her. And she leaned her head against his shoulder, and tried to forget the very unpleasant conversation with her father and Franklin.

It was a short drive to Jeannie Frasier's. A light was still on in the small living room of the one-story house. Lance knocked and called out at the same time, his voice loud and cheerful, "Jeannie? Lance Glover and wife Sarah here. Are you home?"

She was always home. The wheelchair was drawn up to the door, she opened it, and smiled up at them. "How nice of you to come so fast," she chirped in her thin bird-like voice. "Mrs. Jones just came over this evening to bring me some vegetable soup for my supper, and I asked her to phone. She said the designs were pretty, so I thought you might like to see them." She ended out of breath, having said more than she usually did.

They went in, and sat down on the bumpy sofa. Jeannie wheeled herself over to the small table, picked up several sketches, played with the pages nervously, finally wheeled herself back to them and handed the pages to Lance.

It was an instinctive gesture, revealing to Sarah. Jeannie thought of Lance Glover as a hill person like herself. Sarah was still a town person, a mine owner's daughter. It stung, and she forced herself to sit quietly while Lance studied the designs, then passed the pages one at a time to Sarah.

"I did some others at first. But Adam—that Mr. Wis—well, he said to call him Adam—he said they were too complicated. To simply make a line at a time, and make a shape they could carve in clay. So I tried these. What do you think?" she asked, pathetically eager.

"I wish I knew more about it," said Lance, dubiously.

"They look great to me. But I can't picture them on a vase."

Sarah had been studying the designs curiously, her attention caught by the gentle simplicity of the birds, the flowers. Then she gave a little cry. "Oh—this one. Oh, Jeannie, this is beautiful!"

It was a single line of a branch, the snow on it indicated by a few fragile cross lines. On it a bird was singing, his head back, full-throated, warbling. All of it was so simple, yet all there.

Jeannie was smiling, her face radiant. "I saw a cardinal last winter," she said, shyly. "It had snowed a little, and the snow piled on the branches of the trees. And the cardinal sat on the branch, and sang and sang to me."

"It is beautiful," Sarah said again, staring. "I know Adam will like this one. I just know it. The others are lovely, especially the daisy and the carnation. But this—oh, Jeannie, this is special!"

Jeannie laughed out loud, a little soft laugh of pleasure. "Oh thank you," she whispered. "I felt it when I did it. You know, you can feel when something is just right. I felt so wonderful when I finished it. I kept looking and looking at it. And you picked it right out!" She stared at Sarah as though the other girl had given her a precious gift.

They remained and talked a long time, until Sarah remembered the next day of school, and Jeannie's evident weariness. They left, promising to return soon. Lance would tell Adam to come over and see the sketches the next day. He thought also that Adam would be happy with the results.

On the way home, Sarah kept thinking, it was worth it all—her father's anger, his wrath, and his words—to see the radiance and hope in Jeannie's face. Oh, if only something good would come of this, she thought. Oh, if it would only work out.

"It has to work out," she finished her thought aloud.

Lance put his big hand on hers in her lap. "We'll keep trying, Sarah. Things have to break right eventually."

"Oh, I hope so, I hope so."

"And they have lived this way for years. They can take it a while longer," he added.

She shivered. "If I had known—all those years, when

I was so comfortable, at home and at college—it would have hurt me.”

“It did hurt me. I could see what was going on. The handouts from the government that kept people’s bodies alive, and their souls dying and their pride gone. God, that hurt. My uncle killed himself with his own shotgun,” he added. “Put the muzzle in his mouth and pulled the trigger.”

He felt the shiver going through her, the convulsive shock. She could not speak.

“Facts hurt, Sarah. Don’t mean we can hide from them. Got to face them, and lick them, and change the truth to what we want the truth to be. Nobody’s going to change the world for us. We got to do the changing ourselves.”

“That’s a big job,” she said, soberly.

“Sure it is. That’s why it’s worth doing,” he said, proudly. His head was back, the window of the car was open, and the cold wind stirred his black hair. She looked up at him, and thought, *pioneer*. This was the way his ancestors had looked as they had come over from England, furious at the way they were treated there. They had fought their way inland, across the barriers of the harsh mountains, settled in the sweet valleys and drunk the cool waters of their promised land. They had fought the Indians and each other, and fought the Civil War, brother against father and son against brother.

And they had won, only to lose later, to the depression and the apathy that comes from being cheated and exploited.

Except men like Lance had not lost, Sarah believed. They still were winning, somehow, against horrible odds. Like Billy Glover, home from the marines, being put in prison for six months. Like the hill people, fighting to keep their cabins and their land clean.

They went into the house, and felt the pall of its silence. She longed to go to her father, and beg him to change his mind, but she knew his harsh pride and his hardness. She went hand in hand with Lance up the stairs to their bedroom.

Pretty soon, they would have to move out, she said to herself, soberly. She couldn’t take it much longer.

She could not let herself and Lance expose themselves to her father’s wrath and coldness and harshness. They

would wither, and lose something valuable to each other. Their love, their pride, their hope would die.

"Her work was really good, wasn't it?" asked Lance, thoughtfully, starting to take off his jacket and shirt.

"Yes, I think it is. I always knew she had talent, but I never really thought about it." Sarah felt guilt, briefly. "We were in high school at the same time. She was a year ahead of me, always going about in that wheelchair. God, I don't know how she did it."

"Guts," said Lance. "Always admire people with guts. Don't have all the qualities in the world, but if they got guts, they make it, somehow they make it."

"What is guts?" asked Sarah, curiously, pulling on her nightgown. As her head emerged from the covering, she caught Lance's familiar sideways wicked grin. He hadn't smiled like that for a while, and her heart lifted up.

"Want me to explain? Learned it in college, in physiology class," he said wickedly.

She pummeled his shoulder as she passed him on the way to their bathroom. "No, I don't! I mean, what do we mean when we say someone has guts? Really?"

"You got to analyze all the time? Guess so," he said, cheerfully. "We mean—got the courage to know what to do, how to do it, why it has to be done, and get on the job of doing it. No stopping to worry, just getting on with it. Like in Vietnam. Stop to think, you go crazy. Just got to get on with the job."

"Lance? I don't think I'd make a good soldier," she said, soberly. She bent over to wash her face. "I would hate the killing, even though I was told it was the enemy."

"Not many like to kill, honey," he said, thoughtfully. He was standing at the bathroom door. "Don't know anybody who does, except a couple of guys half-crazy over there—they liked to kill. We tried to stay out of their way, 'fraid they might mistake us for the enemy."

"How could you kill, Lance?" She raised up, saw his face. It was dark, hard, withdrawn, as he was thinking. "How could you bring yourself to do it?"

"Orders. Making up my mind it had to be done. Getting sick sometimes, when—aw, honey, let's not talk about it. I get nightmares, seeing some of the faces in my sleep," he added, quietly.

She went into the bedroom, and lay down. Presently, he

came to bed, and came over to her, and held her in his arms, gently, holding her without moving. She knew he was thinking, moving ideas around in his head. She wished she had not brought up the subject of killing, but it had always tormented her.

How could Lance kill? How could a fine man go to war and kill? What did he think when he killed? Did he regret it afterward?

She moved uneasily. "Lance, honey. I'm sorry I brought it up. I don't want you to think about that. It was bad enough, living through it," she whispered, and moved her fingers gently over his face. At the end of the day, the stubble was coming out, and her fingers explored the scratchy masculine feel of it.

"Yeah, it was. Wish I could forget."

"What helps?"

"You help," he said, and his hands began moving on her body, and he caressed her, and began to kiss her once more.

Chapter Nine

Just when Sarah began to think her home would be more peaceful, fresh trouble broke out. At school she heard rumors which she refused to believe. But Lance brought it up on the way home.

"Sarah, did you know that your father is trying to take over Hillman's farm for non-payment of taxes?" His voice was hard, angry.

She glanced up at his face, then away again. He was staring straight ahead at the road. His jawline was like carved granite, like his hills, she thought—hard and gaunt and tough.

"I heard the rumor today, I didn't believe it," she said wearily. Oh, if only she could have peace—peace—

"Billy Glover told me about it. He's going up there and try to find out what's going on. Claude Hillman will talk to him, or if he's crazy now, Bertha will tell him." The little children had been re-buried in the cemetery, but the hate had not been buried. It still simmered and seethed, like fire through the town. It would lick up here, be banked, only to flare up again somewhere else.

"I don't know anything about it," she said, flatly, and looked out the window at her side with eyes that saw nothing.

At home, she went up to her room to change. Her arms felt heavy and weary, with a tiredness that had nothing to do with work. The constant pressure was tearing at her spirits, at her flesh. She could get glimpses of how Lance could be, how life with him would be, how glorious marriage could be—and then smash! The fragments fell about her like fragile glass.

She stayed a long time in the room. Lance had disappeared, working in the study, she supposed. She finally lay down for a time, glad to rest, to be alone.

She heard the telephone ringing faintly somewhere but knew Mrs. Wilson could get it. She lay quietly, and almost fell off to sleep. The door opened, stormily, and Lance burst in, glaring down at her.

She jerked awake, staring up at him. He came over to the bed, and sat down on the edge.

"Billy Glover phoned," he said, a ring of metal in his tone. "Your dad is trying to take over the property. Caspar Dickey is pushing it through the tax office. They say because of the mining rights your dad has on the property, he has first right to buy. Well, Claude doesn't want to sell, and he's sitting on the property line at the road, with his shotgun."

Sarah sat up heavily, slowly, pushing back her short curly hair, looking up at Lance in complete bewilderment. "But—this isn't like dad—" she began weakly, still in a daze.

"I don't think you know what he is like," and his tone was grim. "You see what you want to see, Sarah! You close your eyes to reality. Your dad is kind to you—when he has you under his thumb. When you slide out from under, he puts the pressure on, don't he? So you go back under, like a meek little mouse, like a good girl, and he can be kind and sweet to you once more. Isn't that the way it is?"

She stared at him. She felt numb. To hear it put so brutally, so callously, was enough of a shock. She recognized some truth in his words, but it was not all true—it was not.

"I thought you were a strong-willed woman, you aren't," he went on, his face flushed with anger. "You aren't. You are stubborn, but you give in all the time to your father. You have no will of your own, only his will, whatever he wants is right. Well, I have news for you. He is foreclosing on Claude Hillman's property, and the property of four other farmers. He is grabbing for five properties of over three hundred acres, full of the richest coal for miles around. That is what your father is doing—that shows what kind of a character he is!"

She looked in his face, incredulous, then turned away from the fury in his gray eyes, that made them hard as coal chunks, she thought. Shiny and hard. Hard toward her. She put her face in her hands. He put his hands on

her wrists, and yanked her hands down again, put one hand under her chin, still holding her wrist, and forced her face up again.

"Look at me, Sarah! Don't hide your face from me! I want to see your eyes. I want to know what kind of a woman you are!"

She wanted to say, a vulnerable woman, a wretched woman, a loving woman who has been badly hurt, and please, please don't hurt me any more, I can't bear it, I can't endure it.

She could not speak.

He let her go. "At least you're not crying," he said, roughly. "I would hate you if you turned on the weeping to get at me. Did you know anything about this? Do you know what your father is doing?"

Mutely, she shook her head, her eyes very wide, gazing at him in appeal he refused to recognize.

"I'll speak to your father then. He ought to be home soon. Home! God. What a mockery. I should never have come here. Right into the rattlesnake's nest."

She gave an audible gasp. "You are—sorry you married me," she said, dully. "Sorry. Please—Lance—you are hurting me—please—"

There was no gentleness in him now. "Hurting you? What about the Hillmans? Who cares what is hurting them? And the others, no place to go, no work to do. Their farms and vegetable patches being wrenched away from them. Did you know your father is stripping in the Hillmans' vegetable garden with armed guards to protect the miners?"

She opened her mouth, closed it again. She knew nothing of what her father did; she had never really known. He had offered to show her the mine office, but she had not cared enough to go up there. It was another world, a dirty fierce harsh world and she had always been protected from it, or she had shielded herself from it, she wasn't sure which. Perhaps both. When she was a child, she and her mother had never been allowed up at the mines, or at the stripping operations. Too dangerous, her father had said. The miners were rough. The machines were dangerous. He did not allow them to go. And Sarah, the dainty clean little child with blonde curls and wide green eyes, had been more interested in her dancing class and her

French lessons and her music lessons, than in seeing the dirty miners and their dirty coal.

Now the shield was being ruthlessly stripped from her, as the miners stripped the coal from under the beautiful grass and glorious trees. The beauty was ripped off, and the black coal exposed, then torn from the red earth. Even so was beauty being stripped from her life, and the agony ripped out and held to Lance's merciless gaze.

Lance's head turned alertly. He had heard something, with the quick ears of the hill man. "Your dad's home. We'll go down and ask him some questions."

Sarah shrank back on the bed, and shook her head. "Please, Lance, not me. You can tell me later—"

He caught her wrist and hauled her brutally up from the bed. "You're not hiding up here! Come on, Sarah, you're going to learn the truth about your father, and not from anybody but him!"

Her arm was so wrenched it hurt. She came with him because she had no choice. She was being hauled along. If she did not walk, she was convinced he would drag her along.

They walked down the steps, Lance's hand still gripping her wrist painfully tight. Her father was in the hallway, removing his overcoat. He turned to look at them, half-smiling until he saw their faces. He looked down at Sarah's wrist, and his face went cold and hard, as hard as Lance's.

"We want to talk to you," said Lance, roughly. Franklin came into the hallway behind her father, looking at them curiously. "Not you. Just him," Lance said to her cousin, with his new cold brutality.

Franklin shrugged, and went on up the stairs to his room. Neville Tallentire led the way to his study, and sat down behind his big desk. He usually looked like a giant there, to Sarah's eyes, so powerful, so all-knowing and wise and strong. She was looking with new eyes today, probing for weaknesses.

"You're stripping at the Hillmans'," said Lance at once, as they sat down. He still kept hold of Sarah's wrist, and she shifted uneasily, still in pain.

"You can let go of my daughter's arm. You are hurting her," said Neville, his green eyes frosty.

Lance glanced down at his hand, as though surprised to find it touching Sarah's. He let her go slowly, stared at her

red wrist. She massaged it mechanically, aware he was looking at her, studying her. But he made no apology.

"You are stripping at the Hillmans'," Lance said again, in accusation.

"I have a right to do so," said Neville Tallentire, his tone cold. "What I do with my rights is nothing to you. I am changing my will, Sarah will have no part in the management of the mines after I am gone. You don't need to count on that!"

Lance jerked, Sarah gasped. "Please—dad—" she whispered.

"I'm not counting on anything, not from you. I didn't marry Sarah for her money," said Lance, frigidly, the red high on his Indianlike cheekbones.

"Didn't you? Then why have you encouraged her to use it all on you, everything she has so far!"

"That is my concern!" Sarah cried out hastily. "I wanted to start the pottery industry. It is my money—I chose to—"

"Completely uninfluenced by your husband," said her father, with heavy irony. She shifted her gaze from his face, looking uneasily at Lance.

"You change the subject," said Lance. "Before college, I might have fallen in with your technique, and gotten trapped. But it's been a few years for me since I was green. I'm asking you—what about the Hillmans? Do you seriously think you can take over their property for a few hundred dollars?"

"I can. I am going to. The fools haven't earned enough to pay their taxes. It is legal, what I am doing. I have the right."

Sarah jerked in her place. "Oh, dad, no! It isn't right! It isn't right at all."

"It is right. It is legal. I have had excellent lawyers to advise me," said her father, grimly. "Furthermore, what I do has nothing to do with you two. Franklin will run the mines after I am gone. You, Sarah, will never have a say in it. I am warning you, Lance Glover, you won't get a penny if anything happens to Sarah!"

Lance jumped up, his fists clenched. Sarah caught his one hand in one of hers, holding him back. "Oh—no—no—we don't care about that!" she cried. "I don't want the

mines. Oh, dad, don't say hateful things you don't mean just because you're angry!"

"You don't," said her father. "He does. He would love to get his hands on the mines. The only thing I haven't figured out—" He stopped, and grinned so unpleasantly that she could not believe this was her father, her kind loving father, who had been so good to her. "I can't figure out if he would close them for his beloved hill people and on a matter of principle—"

"I would!" said Lance, sitting down again, his fists still clenched defiantly. "I would close them right up!"

"Or," her father went on as though he had not interrupted. "Whether Lance Glover would turn as greedy as every other human being I have ever encountered, and work the miners harder and more callously than I ever did, and strip the hell out of this area!"

The two men glared at each other, the hate so tangible between them that Sarah wanted to cringe back and hide in a corner. She was shaking.

"That's how curious I am," said her father. "I even thought I might put it to the test. Offer Lance a share in the mines, a job there, and see how he operates!"

"You would soon find out," said Lance, with deadly soft tones.

"Yes, I think I would. But I don't intend to work my miners like that! Still, it might be amusing to see how the hill people would turn on their Glover boy, their white-haired boy!"

Sarah got up. Her knees were shaking. But she had to get out of there. "Lance, let us go," she said, very gently. "I can't take any more. Not now. You neither believe what you are saying, I know that, but you are too angry to know it. Please—let us go."

"I have a couple more questions," said Lance, without looking at her. When she started past him, he caught at her arm, and held her there beside him. By the tightness of his fingers, she knew it was useless to try to leave.

"You can ask all you please. I do not intend to tell you my business!" And her father got up, and started to move around the desk.

Lance flung down Sarah's arm, and was up and around the desk like a black panther, moving lithely, in a deadly

way which caught at her heart. "No—no—" She thought she was screaming, but it came out a whisper.

"You'll tell me what you mean by foreclosing on five farmers! You'll stop your wrecking work—your damn greedy operations—wrecking the lives of five families—more, probably. Damn you to hell, do you think you're God of this place? You don't own the mountains!" Lance's hands had lifted as though he longed to close them on Neville Tallentire's throat.

"I may own them before I'm through," said Neville Tallentire, glaring back at him. He was twenty years older than Lance, shorter than him, but he stood his ground.

"Oh, God, oh, God," whispered Sarah, and ran out of the room. She thought she was going to be sick at her stomach. She ran up the stairs, and to the bathroom, and stood over the bowl, but could not be sick at her stomach. She finally went to lie down.

Lance must have left the house. She heard doors slamming, angry voices, a car starting, then quiet. She closed her eyes, and tried to rest, but her heart was pounding and hurting.

She could not think, she could only feel, and it hurt, hurt, hurt. Her beloved father, so kind to her. And he could do this to people! He could ruthlessly foreclose, take over their homes, their land, their very food! Her father could strip-mine right in the vegetable garden which kept a family alive!

Greed for money! Lance had been right. Her father was so greedy for money that he could do this to families. He would use his considerable influence with the politicians, locally represented by Caspar Dickey, study the tax records, choose the lands he wanted, and take them over.

Claude Hillman with a shotgun could not keep him out. He had no more chance than a pitiful ignorant child, against the forces her father could raise, the armed guards, the law, the sheriff. Yes, Sheriff Halliwell would enforce the law, he was known for that. A strict man, abiding strictly by the law, in this case her father's side—often her father's side, she thought, staring at the ceiling. She could remember occasions when the sheriff had come calling on her father, and they had talked in the study. And, presently, the law was enforced and her father had more land,

or had won his side of a case, or had forced someone to let him strip-mine on the property.

She put her hand on her stomach. It was heaving. But she could not bring up the poison in her system. It was in her mind.

She could not eat. Mrs. Wilson brought her some hot tea, and with lips compressed said that Lance had left the house, and hadn't said where he was going. Sarah went to bed early, intending to pretend sleep. It was not necessary. Lance did not return that night.

He came back early in the morning, as she was dressing. He came in, his face like a black thundercloud, stripped himself, took a hasty shower, and changed to fresh clothes. She dared not ask him where he had been. They scarcely spoke.

They drove to school together, after a breakfast alone. Her father and Franklin had left the house earlier, and she was grateful for that. She finally asked Lance timidly if he had basketball practice today.

"No. Fred is taking over for me," he said curtly, scowling at the road ahead.

She opened her mouth to express surprise. Lance loved his basketball games, and took the practice very seriously. He really enjoyed the sport, and took great interest in teaching the boys properly. But she closed her mouth again. Lance's jaw was as grim as ever. He was planning something. If he wanted to tell her, he would. If not, no asking would get it out of him.

At school, the students were extraordinarily restless. By this, she would have known something was wrong. One of the hill boys was rude to her in class. Another boy started up from his place, but she gave him a cool rebuke.

"If Jimmy doesn't know the answer, it is his fault. We have gone over this three times. Sally, will you recite?"

Sally was nice and safe, a plump pleasant child, with glasses and a bland stare which hid a good mind. She loved to recite and show off her good preparation, and Sarah let her go on and on, which she dearly loved to do. It bored the others, and the boredom sifted down and dampened the fiery spirits of the hill boys.

She went for a walk after lunch in the cafeteria with Jean Lawrence. They had spoken platitudes, hiding their real feelings which were too dangerous to express. Sarah

went out into the schoolyard, and breathed the crisp autumn air, and thought about winter and snow and the mountains. How peaceful the mountains would be in winter, she thought, longingly. She thought for a moment of her honeymoon cabin, the beauty and excitement of seeing the natural world, Lance's sweetness and passion. Would he ever feel like that toward her again, she wondered, or had his love turned to hate?

Had he ever really loved her, or had he merely desired her?

She scuffed her shoes in the thick piles of trees on the edge of the schoolyard. There was a thick ache in her throat. Why had Lance married her? Desire? Other motives? Had he thought he could influence her father, even take over the mines and close them? Or was her father right, that Lance was greedy, and would eventually be a tougher manager and a more cruel man than he was?

Cruelty, she thought. How she hated it. Cruelty and violence. Horrible things to enter the world, and poison it, so that a person was sick with the hate.

She heard the cries vaguely, and turned about, staring in the direction of the schoolyard. She saw the swirls of dust about the little groups of boys, and began running.

Fight. It must be stopped. Yet she felt panic. She was afraid of these half-grown boys, with full-grown passions. As she ran, she saw several men exploding out of the school door. She felt relief, recognized Lance and three other teachers, and the principal, Orson Bowman.

They raced for the three groups of boys, and began pulling at them and yelling commands. Lance saw her approach, tossed his orders over his shoulders.

"Stay away, Sarah! Go in the school. Get Fred and Jim."

She ran for the school house, saw Fred and Jim coming out, unasked, and turned back. She watched in horror as they had trouble separating several of the boys. Knives were flashing in the strong brown hands of several of them, and hate flashed as coldly in their dark eyes.

"Get back!" said Lance to two boys coming in toward them. "Get back, or by God, I'll make you wish you had! You want your heads broken? I'll do it. Get away!"

Sarah flinched at his roughness. But the boys backed away. He took hold of one of the boys near him, yanked

him back rudely, gripped the knife-holding hand in his and spoke more softly.

"You get hold of yourself, boy, get hold. Get hold, I said! Give me that knife. Give it to me, or I'll break your wrist and you won't play basketball this winter! I'm not fooling. I won't have you defying me! Damn it to hell, give me that!" And he wrenched the boy's wrist and got the knife, and then gave him a hard sock in the jaw that sent the half-grown boy tumbling in the dust.

Sarah flinched again and again. But the other men were using the same rude tactics on the other boys. She saw Orson Bowman knock out two of the boys, so they lay prostrate in the dusty schoolyard. He took the knives from three others, and bawled them out in filthy language.

Somehow the fight was stopped, and the knives taken from the boys. Lance was breathing heavily, his face flaming with fury, his eyes flashing.

"All right, you boys, get inside to your classes. And by God, I hope your teachers give you enough work to last a week. And your parents are going to hear about this, every one of you is going to get the tanning of his life, or I'll give it to you myself!" Lance was yelling at them. "I'll see you tomorrow, and if you can sit down, by God in heaven, I'll give you another whipping!"

"And I'll give you another," yelled Orson Bowman angrily. "Fighting in my school! Hell damn it, I'll teach you, boys, I'll teach you—I'll teach you—"

Sarah knelt beside one of the boys who had been knocked out. She raised his eyelids gently. Jean Lawrence brought a bowl and some cloths, and they revived the boys. They were tough ones. They got up, moaning, but went back to their classes.

Sarah tried to calm her restless students. News of the fight had spread like wildfire through the school. She put one boy at the side of the room, bawled out another one, then gave them a surprise test. Nothing calmed them down.

She saw Lance briefly between two of her afternoon classes.

"Any trouble, Sarah?" he asked quickly, staring down at her keenly.

"A little," she admitted.

"Drive them harder. Keep them so busy they don't have time to talk or even think."

"I'll try."

"Do it," he said, his jaw like carved rock.

She tried harder, and succeeded in getting through the afternoon with no fights. She was extremely weary when she went down to the car after school. Lance was not there yet, and she was glad to sit and relax. She smoked a cigarette, indulging herself, leaning back and letting the smoke drift and blur her vision.

Lance came running. She sat up, her senses alerting again. She studied his face as he came closer. He was tense, angry, his black eyes flashing.

He flung open the car door on the driver's side, and spoke to her across the seat. "Get out. Someone will drive you home."

She gasped in shock. "I won't! I am your wife . . . and—"

He got in, slammed the door. "Hurry, Sarah. I'm not fooling around. I got to stop a school bus."

He wasn't furious at her. She leaned back. "I'll go with you. Go on! Start the car. I'm not getting out."

"God, I haven't got time to fight you too!" He started the car, backed out of the space, and went tearing along so fast he almost crashed into two cars before he got out of the lot. She simply closed her eyes and hung on.

When he was out on the highway, he explained tersely.

"Heard a rumor, might be true, might not. Seems the strip miners want to teach some of the farmers a lesson. Going to blow up a section of hills about the time a school bus is going past."

She put her hand over her mouth. "Oh—no—no—no—" To take it out on children! Violence to children! "No, Lance—"

"I don't know. Can't take chances. Sarah, reach into the back and get my rifle out. Cartridges in the box on the floor."

She scrambled around, leaned down, and gingerly got the rifle and the box. She held them in her lap, hating the feel of the smooth metal. He glanced down at them briefly, and returned his gaze to the road. His speed was sixty-five, which was hard on the old car.

"Do you know how to load it?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Then load it," he said. He kept glancing down at her

as she loaded, directing her briefly. "That's it. Close it up. Now keep it ready for me. Hope I don't have to use it, but no telling what we'll run up against."

"Which way are you going to go?" she finally asked. The road wound toward the hills.

"Up toward Hillman's. Several kids on the school bus up that way belong to the farmers who are holding out." He frowned at the road ahead, jerked the wheel, turned off into a side road that wound up higher into the hills. "Just going by hunch. Some boy slipped me the word, nice kid. His father is a miner. You going to tell your father?"

She stiffened at the slight mockery in his tone. "No, Lance," she said quietly. "What we do between us is not going on to him. I am loyal to you, you know that."

He put his hand on her knee, patted it, put it back on the wheel. She felt a little comforted, but wretched also. She hated having to choose between her father and her husband.

Lance drove up the winding dirt road, and she wondered how the lumbering school bus could ever make it up the twists and turns. She kept watching for dust ahead, but Lance saw it first.

"There," he said, nodding at the road ahead. She squinted her eyes, made out nothing. Lance stepped on the pedal and they went even faster, bumping up and down with the gravel and dirt and pebbles. They came to a curve, and she saw the bus up ahead, on a winding road above them.

Lance reached for the rifle, pointed it out the window and fired it three times. She was deafened by the reports, and put her hands on her ears. He flung the rifle in her lap. "Reload," he said, and stepped harder on the gas.

He flung that car around curves so tight she didn't even want to look. She was afraid to see down the side of the steep hills, to where they would go if they wrecked. She reloaded with shaking, wet hands.

Up ahead, the bus had paused. Two children on the road turned wide eyes and tanned faces to them as they stopped in front of the bus. Lance got out, waving his arms in warning.

The driver got out, leaning on the step. "What's wrong, Lance?" he drawled, in hill accents.

"Possible trouble ahead. How many you got left?"

The driver leaned back into the bus, glanced about. "Five kids left, up into the holler."

"Wait a bit. Let's see if—"

Ahead of them a dull booming roar sounded, drowning out Lance's words. Sarah had followed him, the rifle in her hands. She turned about, staring incredulously ahead of them.

An immense slide of red earth was moving down over the road. Another dull boom sounded, and another section of the cliff heaved convulsively, spurting up into the air in sprawling spirals, then settled into a slide over the road.

They watched in silence. The children got out of the bus, and stood watching, with alert eyes. They narrowed their eyes against the sunshine of the late November day, and simply stared and waited.

"Dynamited, by God," said Lance, bitterly. "God. God. What men will do for a little money!"

"Makes you wonder," said the driver, softly, in the same deadly tone. "Just kids here. Just kids."

The children looked up at the two men, then speculatively at Sarah, who was shaking so the rifle quivered in her hands. It felt too heavy, pulling down her arms, hurting her.

"Bus can't get by it," said the driver, finally, studying the road. "Guess I'll take the children back to town and put them up."

"No. The car will make it by the Jimson creek. I'll take them home," said Lance. "Sarah, you want to go back with Corky here?"

"No, I'll come with you," she said, dully, unable to keep from staring at the ragged cliff just ahead of them. She had seen no men at all, yet that had been set by men—miners, her father's miners.

She could not think; she did not want to think. They piled the children into the car. The bus turned around somehow, backing again and again, dangerously close to the edge of the cliff, finally making it around, and going down and back toward town. Lance turned the car around, and headed for a side road, turning up it, and back into the hills. They delivered the children to three cabins back in the mountains. Lance told each family tersely what had

happened, and Sarah watched as faces darkened, and fists were clenched in pockets.

She and Lance went back home then, in silence. It was dark by the time they pulled into the garage. He took the rifle from her, unloaded it, put the cartridges away, and stuck the rifle into the back of the car. "Thanks, Sarah," he said, briefly.

She swallowed. She could not answer him. Numbly, she followed him into the kitchen. Mrs. Wilson turned to smile at them.

"Glory, I thought you would never—" She paused abruptly, staring at their faces.

"Where is Tallentire?" asked Lance.

"In his study," she said, and stared after them as they went through the kitchen to Neville Tallentire's study.

Sarah caught up with Lance in the hall, and clung to his arm. "Lance, please don't talk to dad now. Cool down first. You'll both say things—"

He went on, almost dragging her with him. "I'll talk to him now. And I'll mean everything I say. Come along, Sarah!" When she would have retreated, he caught at her wrist and brought her with him.

He flung open the door to Tallentire's study, and marched her inside. Her father was working on some papers, looking so flushed and tired that her heart went out to him. He scribbled something, then looked up wearily.

"What now? Didn't you say enough last night?" he barked.

"Not enough evidently." Lance let Sarah go, but pushed her in the direction of a chair. "All right. Did you mean to kill those children, or just scare their parents into giving in to you?"

"What children?" Neville Tallentire looked blank.

"Don't play stupid with me!" The men glared at each other. "I'm talking about the children on the school bus. The dynamite went off just where the bus would have been if I hadn't stopped it in time."

There was a sort of cold hush in the room. Tallentire stared up into Lance's bleak face with a kind of horror. "What—are—you—saying?"

Sarah knew, knew with every instinct in her, that it was news to her father, that he did not know what had been done. "Lance, he didn't know—he did not know—"

"Knew it, planned it, paid for it! God damn his soul! Tallentire, will you do anything at all for a little money? Those kids could have been killed. The road is washed away at the edge. If the driver had jerked the wheel, he and five kids would have gone down the side of the mountain and it's a high, sheer drop right there."

Again the cold hush, and the silence of hate. Sarah put her hands on her throat, watching the two faces. Neither would give in. She knew that stubborn look on her father's face, stubborn in the face of accusation, proud; he would not defend himself from the charge. She knew Lance's look, he was accusing, sure of his ground—hard and proud and angry.

"He did not—he did not—plan it," she said, in a whisper. "I knew it—Lance, someone else must have—"

"His miners did it. He will pay for the job. How much money, Tallentire? Fifty dollars for the job? More? Hundred? How much was it worth to you to scare them out? Well, they won't scare. They will fight, they got guns, and they ain't afraid—"

Lance's voice had dropped from its clipped educated ways to the slow deadly cool drawl of the hill man he was.

"They ain't scaring," he added, and turned on his heel and left the room.

Sarah stared at her father, at the proud hurt of his face, and tears stung her eyes. "You didn't—dad, you didn't—?"

He glared at her. She left the room, and ran up the stairs after Lance.

In their bedroom, she turned on him. She was hurt also.

"Lance, he did not do it! He did not plan that! He would not go so far as murder! I know it. How could you accuse him? You accused him of planning to murder—murder children!"

"So he did," said Lance, unfastening his shirt. His black eyes studied her with cold intensity. "You choosing his side, Sarah?"

"I am not choosing sides! I know my father, he would not—"

"You don't know him. You didn't believe he would try to take their lands for non-payment of taxes. You don't believe this either. Why, he didn't even bother to deny it!" His mouth curled cynically. "Knew it wouldn't do no good, I reckon."

He went into the bathroom to splash water on his face and body. She followed, hesitating. She knew better than to argue with him when he was mad. But she had been bitterly hurt about this, and she could not give up so easily.

"Please, Lance, when you are more calm—"

"I'm calm now, Sarah, calm as hell."

"Hell is not calm!" she flashed. "When you are calm—Lance—you must talk to dad. Between you, you must find out who planned this, who carried out the orders—"

"Don't have to ask, I know." His tone was cold, as cold as the rifle and the cartridges in her hand.

"No, Lance, it isn't true—dad would never—"

"You are choosing sides. You done chose his." He brushed past her, and she felt the damp coolness of his body which brushed her arm. But he did not pause and touch her; he did not look at her with love and anxiety. He just went past her to the closet.

"Lance—no sides. Please. Listen to me—"

"I've listened before. Believed you. Forgot you was a Tallentire. Should have knowed better." His tone was slurring into hill talk. He put on a clean shirt, looked about absently. "I'm going over to talk to Billy Glover. Don't wait dinner—guess you wouldn't anyhow. This ain't my house."

He went out.

She leaned against the chest of drawers, holding onto it with cold, shaking hands. She felt faint, sick, yet angry and hard as well. He did not listen to her. He brushed her off as though she did not matter.

Yet he had said he loved her, loved her more than anybody in the world. What did words matter? Deeds spoke louder than words, a lot louder. He, too, had chosen, and he had chosen his hill people to believe. He had refused to believe Sarah or her father.

He did not love her. He could not love her and act like this, she thought bitterly. He put his own people first, believed them before her.

And she? Whom could she believe? Her father? Yes, she must believe him; she knew him, had known him all her life. She was his blood and flesh and mind and spirit. They were akin.

But Lance—Lance was the stranger here. She had said he came first, she was on his side. But how could she mean it? He was her husband, but they were strangers.

Strangers who did not love or trust. Married, without knowing and understanding. Married strangers, husband and wife, pulled ever farther apart. Hate was cleaving them with its sharp, hurting knife-edge.

Chapter Ten

Early December brought snow and freezing rain. Hatred seemed frozen also, and Sarah lived with a faint hope that things would work out. She didn't know how to accomplish it; she could only wait.

Lance slept with her, though he had not made love to her since the bus incident. She wondered how long he would stay away from her. She wanted him desperately, and his passions were even stronger and wilder than hers. Perhaps, one night, he would break down and take her again. Then—then perhaps they could talk and become one again.

The first week of December passed. The school was preparing for Christmas celebrations, though the tensions burned through the students, erupting in little spurts of hate and anger over trivial matters. At home, Sarah felt little of the Christmas spirit, though she went dutifully shopping, fingering ties and shirts and gloves and books, wondering what to get her husband and her father for Christmas. She wished she could give them peace and understanding as a special gift, but not hoping for such a miracle.

She knew Lance had something for her. He had locked one drawer of his dresser, and sternly forbidden her to touch it. There had been a little twinkle in his eyes, and her hopes had risen a bit. Maybe Christmas would loosen the tension in all of them. She knew the minister of the local church was working hard to promote it, and had quietly spoken to many of the church elders about good will and loving kindness.

Sometimes she went over to see Jeannie Frasier and her designs, and chat with her. Her own troubles seemed trivial when she talked to the girl in her wheelchair. Several times she found Adam Wisniewski there, quietly

working with clay on Jeannie's table, trying out designs, speaking little, but always with his welcoming smile and gentleness.

There was a dance one week before Christmas. Lance had mentioned casually he would like to go, and Sarah had promptly agreed. She decided to wear her pretty green dress, hoping the memories of the last time she had worn it would soften Lance. She put it on that evening, brushed her blonde curly hair until it shone, and studied herself so critically in the mirror that Lance teased her.

"What's the trouble, Sarah-girl? Finding gray hairs?"

"I should, all the things that have been happening. No, not yet." She rubbed in eyeshadow just a little, then wiped off some of it.

"Fascinates me, all the junk you put on you." He came up behind her, fastening his tie.

She smiled at him in the mirror, and he smiled briefly, then bent and brushed his lips against her cheek. "Happy?" he asked.

"Just about," she said, slowly. He frowned.

They went downstairs. Her father looked up from his chair in front of the television, and said, rather formally, "Have a good time." His gaze lingered fondly on Sarah, then he looked quickly back at the screen, as though he had betrayed emotion.

Franklin didn't bother to say anything. He was listening to the news. Lance and Sarah went out to the car, and he tucked her hand warmly in his arm.

"Cold night. Expect we'll have snow again soon. Most I've seen this winter. The other winters recently have been mild."

She leaned her head briefly against his shoulder, glad for the friendly exchange. "Yes, it's been a cold winter. Just as well, I guess," she added, absently, thinking of how the snow and rain had closed down the strip mines out in the hills. The roads were too icy, and some had even washed out.

At the dance, they were soon enclosed in a friendly family group. Billy Glover and his wife were there, Orson Bowman and his most recent girl, and other relatives and friends of the Glovers.

Looking about as Lance led her out in the first dance, Sarah noticed a beautiful red-haired girl. She had dark

green eyes, the sort of dark red hair that always looks glorious, a rounded figure, rather voluptuous, that looked poured into a short green silk dress. Her red mouth drooped sulkily, and there were hard lines at her eyes. She was with a man Sarah recognized, the one that Lance had fought at the courthouse riot.

Lance followed her gaze. "Cindy Jameson," he said briefly. "And her husband, Rory McCleary."

"She doesn't look—very happy," said Sarah. "I'm sorry! I didn't mean to make personal remarks."

"She isn't happy. Rory seduced her when she was sixteen. She's got a good mind, was going to go on to college. Instead she got four kids, one stillbirth," he said, with a thoroughness which took her breath.

This was the girl who had been Lance's girl in earlier years. Sarah kept watching her. She was beautiful, striking, even after four children.

Rory was the kind of big brutish man who would rape a girl, thought Sarah. He was large, reddish of complexion, with a kind of lumbering gait that would turn into rolls of fat and bearishness in later years. He was probably a devil to live with, and she felt a moment's pity for pretty Cindy. Then she noticed Cindy's look at Lance, a long look over her husband's shoulder, lingering, narrow-eyed, green sparkling gaze, and stopped feeling sorry.

That girl still loved Lance! Sarah realized it in a moment, with a woman's intuition, and was a little afraid. She was so beautiful, so gorgeous. Did Lance still see her? Oh, of course not, he was married also. But—but he could look at her, and feel something, couldn't he? Did he?

Orson Bowman claimed her next, and was surprisingly light on his feet. He held her too close, though, and she was glad to leave his arms at the end of the dance. Another man claimed a dance, one of the younger teachers at school, bachelor Fred, whom they often teased and made matches for.

He was friendly, neutral, and not from the area. He had brought a local girl, and was curious about the feuds. She answered cautiously, and got involved in a long conversation with him. He was handsome, dark. She looked up at him, and remained with him during the few moments before the next dance.

"Again?" he said, and reached out for her. She nodded,

and they began dancing again. "Did you say the Jamesons usually side with the mine owners? That would be your father's side, wouldn't it?"

"Yes, that's right," she said, colorlessly, and changed the subject to the Christmas party at school. They were both on the planning committee.

Across the room, she saw Lance frowning at her. What was wrong? She wondered briefly, then forgot again. Some other man claimed her, then Fred came over once more, and continued their conversation. His girl was dancing with an endless stream of her cousins and second cousins, he said cheerfully.

The next thing she knew, Lance was circling past them, with Cindy Jameson McCleary leaning her red hair closely to his shoulder. Sarah stiffened, and gave a little gasp, as their eyes met. The green-eyed girl stared at her, narrowly, a little defiantly. Sarah looked at Lance, but he was carefully not looking at her. Wasn't he playing with fire, she thought, nervously, feeling a sharp stab of jealousy at the same time. He shouldn't mix with the Jamesons, considering the way they felt about the Glovers.

They danced a second dance, and a third. It seemed that every time Sarah circled the room, she was close to Lance and the gorgeous red-haired girl, who seemed to be more glowingly beautiful every time Sarah saw her. They were talking animatedly, then pausing, while Cindy put her head down on his shoulder. Sarah bit her lips angrily.

Fred came back to her and claimed her. His face was a little concerned. "Hey, I heard talk," he said, in a whisper. "Does Lance know what he's doing, dancing with a Jameson?"

"He has known her for years," said Sarah, with false calm.

"Oh—yeah. I get you," said Fred, looking beyond her face.

Lance came back to Cindy and claimed her again. Sarah was angry by this time. She sat in a corner and watched, glowering. Orson Bowman wanted to dance, but she curtly refused.

Finally, Lance came back to her, as cool as though nothing had happened. He brought her a cold drink of punch, and a sandwich. "Having a good time, honey?" he said.

"Sure—honey," she said, and bit savagely into the sandwich.

He looked down at her, his mouth quirking, his eyes devilish. What had she done, she thought. It was Lance who was acting up.

"You like Fred a lot?" he drawled as she drank her punch.

She almost choked, a swallow went down the wrong way. She got her breath at last. "Oh—fine. He is nice to talk to."

My God, he's jealous! she thought, in a daze. Lance had been jealous of her and Fred! She should have known better than to dance so often with Fred. She knew how Lance was. She would have to watch her step, and she resolved to do so, no matter what Lance did. Even if he danced with Cindy a dozen times, she would not dance again more than twice with any man, she resolved firmly.

Lance stayed near her after that, and she danced several times with him, twice with Billy Glover, and again with other men whom Lance brought up and introduced. Fred was involved with his girl, and did not come near her again. She was glad for that.

Then the dance was over, and, in spite of glowering looks, nothing had happened. Lance helped her put on her coat, and they started for the parking lot.

"I think it will snow before morning," she was saying, drawing the coat collar about her neck. "Feel that wind, Lance—"

Her words ended in a scream. Three men had jumped from behind their car, and pounced on Lance. He went down in a flurry of fists and boots and flashing knives. She screamed, and went on screaming, frightened out of her wits. She recognized the burly form of Rory McCleary, and lean, dark angry faces of two Jamesons.

Amazingly, Lance got up, slugging. He had knocked out one of the Jamesons, and was tackling the other one. Rory McCleary came up off the ground, and hurled himself at Lance's back. Sarah screamed again, and was yanked back and out of the path by a hard hand.

"Get behind the car!" said a breathless voice in her ear. She obeyed, crouching down, as Billy Glover had a pistol in his hand. He waited, aimed carefully, and fired. Rory

McCleary cried out, almost on the sound of the shot, and went down, writhing, and holding his shoulder.

The other Jameson was coming up off the ground, knife in his hand, launching himself at Billy Glover. Billy shot him, a taut hard look on his face.

Lance slugged the other Jameson, knocked him out, then ran over to Sarah and grabbed her with his arm about her waist. He pulled her with him over to their car. "God-damn, if I'm ever caught again without my gun!" he raged.

She looked back to see Billy Glover running lithely between the cars, ducking down, dodging like a slim quarter-back out of the lot and into the trees beyond the area. He had gotten away.

In the car, Lance started up, and they went scooting out of there. Sarah was still out of breath, and scared witless. She trembled. She had never been so scared as since her marriage, she thought, ruefully.

"Did you see if Billy got away?"

"Yes," she said. "He did. Oh, Lance, I was so frightened!"

"I am a damn fool," he said after a pause. "Shouldn't have danced with Cindy more than once. Sorry about that."

She moved over closer to him, and put her head down on his shoulder. "I was jealous," she said, simply. "Maybe her husband was too. You used to be very fond of her, weren't you?"

"Very. Still like her, sorry for her," he said. He put his arm about her, and squeezed her so tight she thought her bones would break, but she was glad to sacrifice them in such a good cause. She turned herself a little and put her lips on his cheek.

"Lance—I missed you—" she whispered. She held her breath, hoping he would understand.

"I missed you too, honey. Let's make up for lost time tonight."

"Oh—yes!" She didn't care about being coy. She wanted him desperately.

At home, he put the car away, and they walked into the house, with his arm closely pulling her to him. Up in their bedroom, he unzipped the green dress, and kept kissing her all the while. She thought the time passed very rapidly, before her clothes were strewn about the room, and she

was lying naked on the bed. Lance was so sweet when he wanted to be, she thought.

He stripped off his own clothes, and joined her in the bed, under the warm covers, the lights out, his arms feeling for her. His hands started moving over her, from her shoulders, down her arms, over to her waist and thighs. He came closer, and pressed his mouth to hers. She sighed with relief, and reached up for him.

Their bodies clung tightly. She could feel the slight trembling beginning in him, as tension began to build. His right hand went roaming over her breasts, down to her waist, down to her thighs, stroking, learning her all over again. It had been so long—much too long—she squirmed and wiggled under him, trying to reach all of him with her hungry body. Her hands clutched at his back, stroked from his hair down over his spine to his thighs and buttocks, and dug there, her fingers sharp and wanting.

“Oh—honey—honey—” His voice was deep and broken in her ears. His hand went more warmly over her thighs, opened them with a lingering caress.

“Oh, Lance, darling—Lance—it has been—so long—”

“I’ve wanted you—I’ve missed you—”

“Yes, yes, oh, yes—”

She clasped him with her warm eager thighs, her own body beginning to tremble with growing desire. He pressed his fingers skillfully, and she grabbed at his arms and back. She pulled him down sharply to herself, and moved so that he would come deeply to her.

They came together, sliding happily together, closer and closer and warmer and warmer, and hotter and hotter. His body began the intense trembling that meant the coming of his hot desire, and she opened herself as wide as she could, and still he drove in more deeply. It was almost painful, except it was so wonderful.

Then he came, and she came also, and they shuddered together, clung together. Her mind had drifted into the complete happiness of satisfied desire, knowing nothing but her lover, nothing but his hands and his hips and his body and his lips and her responses, hotly wanting him, having him, reacting to him with convulsive involuntary motions inside herself, that shuddered away into little trembling after-shocks.

He finally drew off, and pulled up the covers, which had

slid away in their violent movements. He covered them warmly, and held her in his arms against his wet body, and murmured to her, the way he had in the first days. "My own love, my pet, my darling, my silky darling, my love, my soft love—"

She lay with her head on his shoulder, clasped as close as she could come, twining her legs with his longer harder legs, wanting him to feel her softness and her yielding cushioning body and her plump thighs and her roundness, so he would want more of her.

Once was not enough, not for him, not for her. His hands began a more ardent exploration of her body, and soon he was drawing over her once more.

"Sarah?"

"Yes, oh, yes, oh, yes—" And she reached up for him eagerly.

"Sarah, oh, Sarah—silkeness and warmth—"

Her mouth roamed hungrily over his face, her lips feeling the bristliness of his cheeks and jaw, the leanness of his nose, the warmth and quick response of his lips, up to his forehead, over his ears, down again to his throat as he drew over her. Her hands were exploring also, over his shoulders and arms, down over the hairy chest, teasing, pulling at the hairs gently, her fingers going on and on, down to his thighs, testing, trying, learning him, exploring with excitement and desire. His hands were moving over her as she moved under him.

They came together, and made an explosion of love and desire in their quiet room, and blasted all doubt and hate and fury away from themselves for a time. Their sleep that night was sweet.

In a few days it was Christmas. Lance and Sarah had put up a tree, not knowing if Neville or Franklin would care to join them, but deciding to do it anyway. In the morning of Christmas day, in their rooms, they exchanged their most intimate gifts.

He gave her perfume. "It smells like you," he said, "and this looked like you." A pearl brooch, in a flower design, with matching small earrings.

She gave him some socks, and, less practical, a book of poetry. He opened it, and became so absorbed that she knew with delight that she had chosen what he liked. She had not yet seen many of his poems. Perhaps one day he

would show them to her, she thought, longing to see them, but not wanting to rush him into that confidence.

Franklin was away at Christmas, and Sarah thought he didn't want to give or receive any gifts with them. They did not particularly miss him. Mrs. Wilson gave them some jams she had made.

Her father gave her a new coat, which made Lance frown a little. Then he gave Lance a hunting jacket, just the kind Lance liked, and the men reluctantly exchanged rueful smiles.

Sarah tried on her new coat. It was a lovely honey-beige, just a shade lighter than her hair, and fit in a beautiful way. She kissed her father, and said it was just what she wanted.

She and Lance had fretted a little over what to give her father, and finally settled for a new pipe, a pen set to replace his ancient set, and a remote-control adjustment for the television set. The men spent two hours setting it up, and played with it like two children, thought Sarah fondly.

She went out to Mrs. Wilson to help with Christmas dinner and happily reported that everything was fine.

Billy Glover came over briefly, carrying some gifts. Lance and Sarah gave him theirs for his family, and they talked a little. Later, Lance went out to the car with him, and sat in the car and talked for an hour.

When he came back, he was grave and troubled, speaking little. That afternoon, he went out, and was gone three hours. Sarah dared not question him, seeing the closed hard look on his face. Things had gone quietly for a time, and she wished that the trouble would blow over.

Surely, when her father realized the trouble he was giving the farmers, he would stop trying to take their land. They had to eat, they had families to feed, and they could not get jobs in town with the recession on.

Later in the afternoon, Lance returned, and told her he wanted to go over to Jeannie Frasier's for a time. Adam and Martin would be there, he said.

She agreed to go with him. She wrapped a scarf for Jeannie, but Lance said not to give presents to the other two. They had little money to go on, and would be embarrassed at not having gifts to exchange.

At Jeannie's they found Adam, and soon Martin joined them. When Sarah went out to the kitchen to make coffee

for them, she was surprised and touched to see the cupboards and refrigerator were full. There was a turkey, with all the trimmings, dressing, potatoes, cranberry sauce. They must have had a feast, she thought. She was glad for Jeannie, and curious also. There seemed to be a curiously tender relationship between the crippled girl and the man from Czechoslovakia. He seemed fatherly and kind to the girl. Certainly, Jeannie was glowing as she had never done before. Perhaps she was eating better, with her increased pay, thought Sarah.

They stayed longer than they had planned. Sarah had prepared the coffee. Adam came out to the kitchen, and put sandwiches and cakes on plates, with the ease that said he had been in this kitchen often before.

"Jeannie is looking better than she has ever looked," said Sarah impulsively to the big man.

Adam said, "She looked good to me from the first. But she is not now so thin, yes?"

"Yes, she has gained a little weight, and she has better color in her cheeks."

"You have known her a long time?"

"We were in school at the same time."

"And she was always crippled?"

"Yes, always. But she was proud. She always took care of herself. Her classes were always arranged for the ground floor. She got around amazingly well."

"She is a proud and self-contained woman," said Adam, carefully slicing bread. "Such a woman has much inside her which comes out but slowly. Do you not think so?"

"I had not thought about it," said Sarah, glancing curiously at his face, bent over his task as earnestly as he had bent over injured Donna. She had a quick flash of him, in the resistance in Czechoslovakia, always working slowly and carefully and accurately.

"Obvious women have never attracted me," said Adam, firmly. "A woman who shows only the surface, and there is emptiness beneath, no mind, no soul—pah! It is not worthwhile. But such a woman who has a thoughtful mind, a gentle careful soul, the wisdom beyond her years, an instinct—ah, that is worth the friendship efforts. Yes? Like flowers which unfold to reveal their colors and scents."

Hum, thought Sarah, following him back to the living room. She was a little troubled. Surely he would not be

kind to Jeannie, and then leave her cold? Yet men like Adam did not stay long in one place, probably. He would move on with the welfare work, and Jeannie would go back into her solitary existence, her proud loneliness. Sarah felt a little sick, as she watched the glowing look upturned to Adam, the thin arm outstretched for the fragile china cup, the little smile on the soft red mouth. She was so vulnerable.

What would Jeannie do when Adam left, and she was alone once more? No work was enough; work was only the solace to be turned to, the business which filled the hours and gave one the illusion of being useful in the world. Work filled the hands, but not the heart. Work made one weary enough to sleep, so that dreams of what might have been did not keep one awake and restless.

Yet Jeannie would probably have said that she would prefer having a handsome interesting man to speak to her and admire her, to have herself drawn out and feel wanted, rather than never knowing the feeling at all, never knowing herself looked at with interest.

Even though there would be dullness and emptiness, there would still be memories, and one could close one's eyes and dream. It was better than having nothing to dream about at all, thought Sarah, and lowered her eyes to her coffee cup, so she would not intrude when Jeannie's eyes met Adam's, and glowed with new beauty.

On the way home, Sarah was silent, thinking, worrying about Jeannie and Adam. It was not her concern, she could do nothing without interfering badly, causing more hurt. She resolved that when Adam did leave, she would try to see that Jeannie was not too much alone. She could go visit her, talk to her more, draw her into activities.

"Sarah? One more thing." Lance had stopped on a side street without her noticing. He opened a parcel, and drew out two objects.

She gasped, and flinched from them, as though they might bite. "Oh, Lance, where did you get—"

"Billy Glover got them for me. Here, try this small revolver, see if you can hold it comfortably." He closed her small fingers about the cold steel.

She wanted to protest, to cry out. He was lifting the weapon, sighting it, testing it. He put a box of cartridges on her lap.

"I'll teach you to load it and shoot it," he said. "I'll take the larger one. I want you to carry it every day, and every night. Carry it in your purse, where you can get it out easily. A gun ain't no good if you can't get to it."

"But Lance, I don't want—oh, Lance, we won't have more trouble—"

"Trouble comes to the man who isn't prepared," he said firmly. "If it comes to a man who is prepared, it ain't trouble. So we are going to be prepared. Tomorrow afternoon, I'll take you out to the hills, and we'll target-shoot," he added, and started the car again.

The pistol lay in her lap like some evil coiled thing, ready to strike.

Chapter Eleven

Lance was as good as his word. They went out almost every day for several weeks, during the Christmas holidays, and afterwards after school, to the hills. He would take her to some lonely place, and teach her to shoot, sighting, aiming, handling the gun quickly, loading quickly, shooting first at trees and stumps. Later he made her shoot a rabbit and some birds, which made her flinch.

Whenever she refused, he was inflexible, and she had to give in and do it. Hating it, she would shoot a bird, and watch it drop wounded to the ground.

"You got to do it, Sarah," he said, harshly. "Remember, you could be saving your life, and maybe mine too. Can't hide your eyes in this world. You got to keep your eyes open, and be ready for anything."

She thought, Ready to shoot a man? Ready to shoot someone I know? How could I? I never could!

But she had never thought she could bring herself to shoot a bird, either, and she had. The worst was when Lance drew a crude outline of a man on some pieces of cardboard fastened together, hung it against a tree trunk, and taught her to shoot to wound and to shoot to kill. He taught as coldly and impersonally as though he will still an army sergeant.

She came away from the shooting sessions exhausted mentally and emotionally, at first. Later she felt more impersonal also, and took some pride in her growing accuracy and speed. Was this how it became? she wondered. A person grew more deadly, and was proud of it? She was only gradually coming to know some new aspects of herself.

When she thought that her own life might be in danger, it was an abstract thought, nothing she could touch. But

thinking of Lance in danger, or possibly a child of hers—and she felt like a lioness, fierce and deadly.

The clay factory had a good start. They now employed seventeen persons, and the first clay vases were on sale in the drugstores, and in the two resorts nearby. The resorts reported a demand, and quickly sold out. Adam and Jeannie thought of more designs, and began to work directly with the clay to invent more. The more conventional designs did well, but they thought there might be a market for more expensive individual pieces.

Martin was quite a happy man these days. Donna was slowly recovering, but Jimmy still spent much of his time with her at the hospital. He was going to take her home when she could be moved, they said. Martin did the field work of the welfare projects, and Adam worked with the clay factory.

Sarah had offered to do the bookkeeping for the clay factory. She was the only one with experience, and it didn't take much time, for the operations were simple. The payroll took most of the profits and the time in bookkeeping. She worked on it at Jeannie's, and kept the books there. It was better than having them at home, she thought.

And did not analyze why she thought so.

She was working on the books one evening, with Lance doing homework at the table opposite, and Adam and Jeannie working on some clay objects at another table. They were silent, but it was the silence of complete friendship and understanding. Sometimes Adam muttered to Jeannie, something about the clay, or the design, or plans for the next day. Or Lance would say, "My God, he will never spell if I beat him for a month!" And Sarah would smile at him, and bend down to her books again.

Adam finally said, "I wish we had the money to start a glass factory now. I have two men who have worked in glass."

There was a long silence after he had said that. Sarah paused at her books, her pen still. She saw Lance's red pencil pause also in its slashing across English compositions. It finally started on again, and Lance shook his head slightly.

Sarah was thinking still. She had no more money to invest. Adam had said in a year or two they might be able to save enough from profits to begin a glass factory. But

the equipment was more elaborate and much more expensive, and the techniques more difficult to teach. Still, Adam had worked in glass.

And the raw materials were here, the sand and silica, and he had raved about the colors possible to produce. He liked the clear glass in white best, but they could do a fine red, and a marvelous blue, he thought.

Money. Sarah tapped the pen on the notebook thoughtfully, a frown creasing between the lines of her eyebrows. Her father was the only person she knew who had any money to invest, in all of Rivertown.

Jeannie finally said, "The clay is doing so well, Adam, we must be satisfied with what we have. Later on—" And she smiled at him, that glowing look that made her thin face suddenly beautiful.

She saw Adam reach out his huge paw, and gently touch the thin hand near his for a long moment. Then he drew it back and began working the clay again.

Sarah tackled her father the next day. It was Saturday, and he had come home early from the mines, at midday. The blustery, cold January weather was not good for working at strip mining, and they had closed down for the weekend.

Since Christmas there had been a wary armed truce between her father and Lance. The stripping operations had ceased at Hillman's, but Lance was not sure if it were his words or the bitter weather which had stopped them. He was keeping an eye on the situation. Her father had said nothing about his plans. He did not speak to Sarah about mining. Franklin kept his mouth shut, not liking Lance, not trusting Sarah.

Sarah went to her father's study after lunch. Lance had gone to a basketball game; his team was playing one of their arch rivals. Lance was always so absorbed at the games with his coaching, that she saw little of him, and felt she was an unnecessary distraction.

Her father leaned back from his books, and ruffled up his graying brown hair. His green eyes were calm today. Things must be going well, she thought, hopefully.

"I want to talk to you, dad."

"Fine, Sarah, just so we don't discuss the ethics of stripping," her father drawled, reminding Sarah he had been a hill boy once himself. It was a long time ago, but he had

been, and he must still remember what it was like to scrape a living from the hard soil.

She sat down opposite him. "No, not about stripping, dad. I want to tell you about the clay factory. It is going quite well. I am—doing the books for them. We have cleared a profit this month. It is small, but it will grow."

There was a flicker of interest in his green eyes, so like Sarah's. "Profit? Really? How many employees?"

She told him, and he nodded. "Well, that's good, good."

"Dad, there are others out of work. The clay factory has absorbed all it can for the time. If we make too many vases and pots, there won't be a market. And so we thought of starting a glass factory."

He stiffened. "Don't take on too much all at once, Sarah! You'll run into trouble there!"

She went on quietly, "Adam has worked with glass also. You know, much of our good imported glass comes from Czechoslovakia, and they do a beautiful job. He was trained in glass. He knows the techniques."

"That's the Communist fellow," said Neville Tallentire.

"He worked in the underground, in the resistance, for many years, dad," she told him gently. "His wife and son were murdered by an informer."

"He's bitter, probably. But he'll go back and join up again with those Commies," said her father.

"Never. He hates Communism, the police state. He is for the individual, for free enterprise, so long as people are not left out, made to starve, for the sake of others' profits."

"Sounds like a Communist," said her father, flatly.

"Sounds Christian, dad. It was in the sermon last Sunday, if you were listening. Preacher said we are responsible for our brothers, that no one should starve in a land of plenty. That is Christian."

"Hum. Going to argue with me, today, Sarah? I got lots of work to do," and he shuffled his papers, a stubborn look at his jaw.

"I won't take long. I didn't come to argue. I wanted to ask you to finance a glass factory for us."

He stared at her silently, his green eyes darkening. She swallowed, but met his look steadily.

When he said nothing, ominously, she went on, "Adam intends to start one in a year or two, when the profits are

good enough to buy the equipment. They can use the same building they are already renting. It is huge. But the men and women need jobs now. Two are already trained in glass-blowing. They can be the nucleus of the work force. Adam will train the others. They will probably have to experiment at first, with the local raw materials. But Adam says—"

"Adam says—Adam says—my God, I got to have my daughter quoting a Communist at me," her father exploded, and she flinched. "Look, Sarah, I'm not throwing good money after bad! You have put a pile into their projects, isn't that enough?"

"No, dad, I would put in more if I had it. I don't. So I'm asking you to come in with us, and help us."

He groaned, helplessly, at her firm tone. He ruffled his head like an enraged bear. She got up.

"We'll talk about it later, dad. I wish you would think about it. I know you have the money, and it wouldn't take a lot. You wouldn't miss it!"

"I always want a good return for a loan, Sarah! This will be money down the drain!"

She smiled at him with some mischief, and gave him a tough parting shot. "Oh, dad, it wouldn't be a loan. I meant you to give it to us!" She went out and gently shut the door over his outraged bellow. She was smiling as she went up the stairs to her bedroom.

She talked to him about it again, three times, giving him first reasons for the investment, then appealing to his sympathies, then telling him he ought to please her. He finally gave in, growling helplessly at his own foolishness.

"I'm a gol-durned fool, that's what I am! Throwing good money after bad," he groaned. "Durn it, Sarah, quit going after me! Isn't your husband enough for you to manage?"

She dropped a kiss on his head, and gave him a big hug. She was so happy she wanted to cry and laugh all at once. It would mean so much to the families, to the ones who would work and learn a new trade and have money coming in during this tight, difficult time for them.

"Thank you, dad. And you know I can't manage Lance, he manages me!"

"Good thing, too. Guess you picked out a good husband after all. He won't spoil you rotten the way your mother and I spoiled you!"

She told Lance later that evening. He could not believe it. He lifted his head from the study table and stared at her incredulously. "Your dad is—what?"

"Dad is giving us the money for the glass factory, Lance. I persuaded him it would be a good thing."

"He won't get any money back for years! I can't believe he agreed to a loan!"

She leaned across the table, and handed the check to him. "It isn't a loan, honey. It was a gift to me, and I'm going to put it in the bank, and start buying the glass equipment that Adam needs."

He picked up the check with shaking hands. He stared at it, then shook his head. "I can't believe—I can't believe—"

She smiled at him. "I can't wait to see Adam's face. Could we go over tonight, Lance?"

"Better wait until the check clears the bank—" he began, then looked into her face. It showed her hurt, her pride, she knew. "Okay, honey," he said, more gently. "Let's go tell Adam and Jeannie and Martin. This will set us all up."

They left their paper-grading for later, and went over in the cold January evening to Jeannie's. As they had expected, Adam was there, and he soon phoned to get Martin when he heard the news. They were jubilant, incredulous with delight. Adam said he would go at once to buy some glass equipment.

"My God, we could hire fifteen more as soon as we get going," said Martin, doing rapid figuring on the back of an envelope. "Fifteen more families going off welfare—we'll soon do ourselves out of a job, Adam!"

They beamed at each other. Jeannie's face shadowed, and she stared down at her slim hands folded in her lap. Sarah caught her breath at the pain she knew Jeannie was feeling. But the girl looked up with a smile, and a little toss of her head, to meet Sarah's sympathetic eyes with a firm look.

"This will be wonderful," the girl said. "I know a man who has worked in glass. He is out of work now. Jimmy Peters."

"Give me his name, I will see him," said Adam. "Only first I must phone about equipment, see how soon we can get it. I will borrow the truck again, Martin, I could go on Tuesday if all arrangements can be made."

Lance put in slowly, with a cool hard drawl, "It won't do any good to ask Jimmy Peters."

Jeannie looked at him, and understanding seemed to dawn in her face. "That's right—I forgot—"

Sarah asked bluntly, "Forgot what? If Jimmy is out of work, and can do glass work—"

"He is a close friend of Rory McCleary, and his mother was married to a first cousin of Mrs. Jameson—"

"Oh, God, the Hatfields and the McCoys," groaned Martin, trying to be funny. Neither Lance nor Jeannie looked amused. "We'll ask him anyway. If the man is hungry enough, and has pride enough—"

"He has pride enough, pride enough to starve before he goes on a project paid for by Mrs. Lance Glover."

"They don't have to have my name in anything," Sarah put in quickly.

"You're my wife," said Lance flatly. "That means everything in this country."

Sarah soon found out he was right. Jimmy Peters refused to take part in the project, though Adam reported he was excited about it, and wanted to work badly. He had three children, said Adam, sadly. None of the Jameson family and friends would join in, though several of them could use jobs.

Lines were being drawn strictly in the Jameson-Glover feud. Sarah hated to see it, and protested to Lance. He was inflexible. "We're not killing, be grateful for that, honey. But don't blame them for not having anything to do with us. We don't like or trust them either!"

"But, Lance, they need the work!"

"Someone else will have to find jobs for them," he said, with what she thought was callous indifference.

Adam went East, and came back with some glass equipment. He set it up with the help of two other men, and soon they began working with the glass, practicing, experimenting. But already Sarah had another worry.

Caspar Dickey and Sheriff Halliwell came to call on her father. They had not talked long when Sarah was called by her father. She went down to the study. Lance had gone out that evening to talk to Jimmy Fox.

Neville Tallentire said at the doorway of his study, before opening the door, "Sarah honey, they just want to

ask questions. Answer them truthfully, and no one will have any trouble."

She stared at him. "What do they want, dad?" She felt suddenly instinctively uneasy about this. She wished that Lance were here.

"They will tell you." He opened the door, guided her in with authority. "Here she is, Sarah, you know Caspar Dickey—"

She nodded, and finally accepted the damp hand of the politician she detested. He beamed at her, looking at her body with a quick flicker of his eyes, back to her face. She turned to the other man.

"Good evening, sheriff."

"Ma'am," he said, standing stiffly. Ephraim Halliwell was a drawling hill man, who stood squarely in the middle of any arguments. He was a big man, who could lift a man right out of a fight, punch him, and stick him in jail without straining a muscle. He could ride and shoot. Others said his best riding was on a rail fence, right between the contesting parties. Sarah eyed him warily, then sat down.

"Now, you just answer what he asks, Miss Sarah," said Caspar Dickey suavely, polishing his hands together. "You won't need to worry about anything—you just answer his questions."

Her mouth tightened. She disliked this oily man, she thought. She wished Lance would punch him out of the house. But he was an associate of her father—and it was her father's house, as Lance had said several times recently.

"My name is Glover," she said curtly. "Mrs. Lance Glover. Not Miss Sarah any more, as you will recall, Mr. Dickey."

Her green eyes flashed as she looked defiantly toward the sheriff, to find him staring at her blandly, with no more expression than before.

Before Caspar Dickey could speak, the sheriff spoke. "Now, ma'am, Mrs. Glover," he said, gently, "I want you to cast your mind back to the evening when there was that thar fight at the courthouse, when Mrs. Fox got shot."

Sarah stiffened, shocked now. She stared at the sheriff, seeing his large wind-reddened face, his tan, his hard eyes, and narrow mouth. She wished Lance were there, so they would not bully her. She didn't want to talk about that evening, not without Lance.

She tried to say so, "When my husband returns, I will talk to him, and we can discuss this together." She wanted her tone to be very firm and sure, but to her disgust it quavered.

"No need to trouble him," said Sheriff Halliwell gently, the ring of steel in his voice. "We just have a few questions to ask you. Now, we saw you there, and we know you was there practically the whole time."

"Yes," she said, flatly.

"When did you come? During the speeches?"

"That's right," she said.

"You come while there was speaking, and you and Lance worked your way up near the platform."

"Yes," she said.

"Did you see Billy Glover at that time?"

The question threw her. She was not expecting it. She stared at him blankly. "I—I don't—"

"Just answer the question, Sarah," said her father quietly, from behind her. She felt his hand reassuringly on her shoulder. But, strangely, she wished that Lance were there instead.

"I don't know," she said.

"You don't recall seeing him when you first came?"

"No."

"Now, the shot was fired, and you rushed up on the platform, and bent over Mrs. Fox. You helped that man, Adam what-his-name is—"

"Adam Wisniewski," she said. "We helped stop the bleeding, though he did most of it. He fought in the resistance in Czechoslovakia—until he was betrayed, and his wife and child murdered."

"Ah, yes. That is another story," said the sheriff, as though not listening.

She felt angry and impatient. They didn't want to hear any good of Adam, who was a good and brave and wise man. They just wanted to believe malicious gossip, to fit a Communist into the pattern they had built for him, and make him fit, even if they had to cut off the truth to make the fit tight.

"You and Adam—his name—helped Mrs. Fox. Then they took her away to the hospital."

"Yes."

"But you did not go with them to the hospital."

"No."

"You remained on the platform," said the quiet pleasant voice of the man who was asking for information.

"Yes."

"And you witnessed some fighting. Your husband, fighting Rory McCleary, for example."

She stared at him, in hostile silence.

"You witnessed Lance Glover fighting Rory McCleary."

"Yes," she said, finally, reluctantly.

"And was Billy Glover fighting?"

"Yes."

"You saw him then?"

"Yes."

"In the crowd on the courthouse lawn?"

"Yes."

"Was he using a knife?"

"I don't know. And there were plenty of Jamesons fighting!" she cried out, turning her glance to Caspar Dickey accusingly. "The Glovers weren't fighting each other, that's for sure!"

The door burst open, and she flung about, to stare up at her glowering husband. "Reckon you forgot to call me," he said, in his soft deadly drawl. "Evening, Sheriff. You want to talk to me?"

"Not now, Lance Glover," said the sheriff. "We're talking to your wife."

"Then I'll just listen, I reckon." And he came behind Sarah, moving over Neville Tallentire firmly, to put his hand on Sarah's shoulder. She felt warm and comfortable with his hand there.

The sheriff paused in his questioning, looking uneasy for the first time. "Reckon we found out what we come to," he said.

"Ask her again. Make sure," said Caspar Dickey triumphantly. "Ask her about Billy Glover."

The hand on her shoulder tightened cruelly with its grip. She shifted in the chair, but did not try to shake it off.

"You saw Billy Glover during the fight?"

"Yes," she said.

The sheriff glanced at Lance Glover. "And you did not see him before the shot was fired?"

"I don't remember."

"Lance Glover was with you when the shot was fired. Did he have a rifle?"

"No, of course not!" she blazed.

She heard Lance give a hard, sighing breath.

"But you did not see Billy Glover before the fighting and before the shot was fired?"

"I did not."

"Well, that settled it, sheriff! Must have been Billy Glover. Causing trouble," said Caspar Dickey.

"Not yet sure," said the sheriff. "Lots to question yet." And he moved placidly, like a huge ox, toward the door.

"What are you doing?" asked Lance quietly, in his deadly cold hill drawl. "You framing Billy Glover?"

"No frame," said the sheriff, gazing at him firmly. "Just checking out some facts."

"You come to me, I'll tell the facts! And they smell! Who's paying you for this, Caspar Dickey? As you know, you can be bought for damn cheap these days!"

The politician whirled on him, went greenish-white, and backed toward the sheriff. Sarah stood up uneasily. Neville Tallentire said, "I'll see you to the door," in a monotone.

He went away with the two others. She heard low tones, then the door banging.

"What did they ask you, Sarah?" Lance was quiet-voiced, ominously so.

She told him bluntly. "I think they are trying to frame Billy Glover for the shooting of Donna Fox. But that is foolish. He would not shoot her. He had no cause. She was helping his people!"

At the door, her father said, "Dickey said he wanted to start trouble, that he did it deliberately so the Jamesons would be blamed!"

"Billy isn't that kind!" Sarah cried hotly, thinking of the quiet ex-marine, the gentle man who was so kind until his own were touched and hurt. She thought of Billy, coming to the rescue of Lance when he was jumped by three Jamesons. Yes, he was loyal to his own, but he would not kill to start trouble. "He doesn't start trouble, he stops it! You don't know Billy!"

Her father just stared at her. Lance said, with soft bitterness, "You're talking to a man who has his ears plugged with coal dust, Sarah. Come away."

Her father's eyes flickered with hurt, then blanked again.

She looked back appealingly as Lance led her away. But her father had turned and was seating himself again at his desk.

In the hallway, she turned to Lance. "They don't know Billy Glover. He wouldn't shoot a woman, not her, not Donna. She hadn't harmed—she had helped. He would not shoot—and besides, there is the rifle. They can compare bullets—" The thought appealed to her, and she looked up with sparkling eyes.

"You seen too much television, honey," he said, gently. They went on to the stairs, up to their room. He seemed deep in thought. In the room, with the door closed, he said, "They have compared bullets, Sarah. And Billy's rifle was stole that day. He didn't have it that night. It could be Billy's rifle someone used."

She sat down on the edge of the bed, her knees had given way. "Oh—no—oh, Lance!" she whispered, staring up at him.

"He won't have a chance at a trial," said Lance grimly. "They are set on framing Billy. It was set from the start. He got his rifle back on his front porch the next day. It had been fired."

Chapter Twelve

On Thursday evening, Lance said to Sarah, "Pack a suitcase, honey. We're going away tomorrow until Sunday night."

She stared at him over their study table, the piles of paper scattered between them. "Where, Lance? Don't you have a game on Saturday?"

"I've arranged about that. We're going to see my dad. I haven't been up there for a bit. Take some slacks and sweaters, it'll be cold. And your woolen nightie," and he slanted a wicked grin at her. "Even I can't keep you completely warm in that cabin, Sarah!"

She swallowed several protests. She didn't want to upset him. She had never been to his home, because she had never been asked before. She began to think how she could arrange her work to go. If she stayed up late and finished the papers tonight—if she did some washing out tonight—and packed—

"What time do you want to start tomorrow?"

"Soon as we can get away after school. We'll have supper with them."

"That's fine," she said, trying to summon up her enthusiasm. He sent her a swift too-penetrating look, and bent to his papers again. She had never been in one of the mountain cabins. She could not picture how they were. Would it be one room, with everyone sleeping on blankets on the floor? Surely not. Lance had a large family, and they lived better than that.

It was past one o'clock when she crawled into bed beside her sleeping husband. But through her weariness she had the satisfaction of knowing all was in order to start out the next afternoon.

They came home from school, finished packing, and set out. Lance was in one of his quiet moods, thinking so

hard, he scarcely spoke to her. But she was glad to sit and be quiet, with her eyes closed sleepily. She hoped she would not have to visit long tonight, and could get to bed early—if there was a bed for her!

They soon left the highway, turned into a side road, and inched around some spills from the strip mining, then on up into the hills. They went on and up for a long distance. She could glance back and see the river that wound through Rivertown, then presently it was gone, and she knew they were back behind the hills, and into the unspoiled regions of the mountains. The trees were bare of leaves now, except for the tall evergreens, and some bright scarlet bushes.

It was more than two hours before they turned into a narrow lane. The car bucked and spluttered several times, but Lance forced it forward, and it made the steep winding trail, to halt before a large neat cabin set against a wall of stone cliff. Two evergreens sheltered it, bushes were set about, and the remains of a wide flower garden were thick with black dirt and some strands of remaining vines.

"Does it snow much up here?" she asked idly, thinking of that steep road.

"Plenty. They get snowed in about every winter. Then the boys don't have to go to school. They don't cry much," he added, and came around to open the door.

She got out, and turned shyly from the open door and the people spilling from it. It was dusk, and she couldn't see them very well. There seemed so many of them. She picked up her small overnight make-up case, and waited while Lance pulled out suitcases. A tall boy galloped up to them, beamed at her, then awkwardly took two of the cases from Lance, and headed for the cabin with them.

"Come on, honey," he said, and led the way to the front porch. A tall stooped man with white hair was standing with stern dignity just in front of the door. He gave her a long keen look, then smiled. She smiled back. He looked just like Lance, only with lines in his face and white hair.

"This is my pop," said Lance. "Pop, this is Sarah, my wife."

Her hand was half-crushed in a hard calloused hand, then gently released. "Happy to welcome you, Sary," he said, in an unexpectedly deep soft voice. "This here is

Lizzy, my daughter. This here is Naomi, wife of my son Robert."

The women shook hands, speechlessly, their eyes studying each other, then dropping shyly. The children were introduced, two tall boys of Naomi's, and another girl and two boys. The women wore plain cotton dresses, with sweaters covering their shoulders.

They all went into the cabin, which seemed to shrink when filled with all the family. Howard Glover sat down in what seemed to be "his" chair, large and square-backed, hand-carved, of sturdy oak. Sarah was motioned to a plump rocker, where she was stared at steadily by the small girl, and given sideways glances by the others. Lizzy and Naomi sat side by side on a dark-covered sofa. The only light in the cabin was from a kerosene lamp on the square table which was probably their dining-room table.

Howard Glover spoke, slowly, deliberately, asked of news of the family in Rivertown, and Lance answered him. The women scarcely spoke, glancing upward with dark eyes, shyly flickering glances about, then down again at their work-worn hands. Sarah felt like a stranger there.

The boys went out to finish their chores. As at a signal, the two women stood up, took the lamp from the table, to remove the thick cloth. They put on a tablecloth, were murmured to by the small girl, who was shushed severely. Sarah wondered if the tablecloth was brought out only for grand occasions. It was a beautiful one of white lace and linen, hanging over the sides of the large table in sweeping folds, transforming the dark cabin.

Places were set, the food on the stove served. Chairs were set up to the table for the adults. The children were still running about outdoors. The adults ate, and ate well, of the ham and green beans and onions, of the corn cake and syrup, and cup after cup of hot black coffee.

When they were finished they rose from the table. Naomi hesitated, then said to Lance, "Why don't you show Sary about outdoors? It ain't quite dark yet a while."

"Good idea," he said, quietly, and led Sarah outdoors. They wore their coats.

She turned to him when they were alone. "The bedroom they gave us—isn't that for the women?"

"They are glad to give it up to us," he said, looking

straight ahead. "They will sleep in the loft with the children tonight."

She hesitated, then made the reluctant offer. "We could—sleep in the loft—"

He grinned. "You scared of mice?" he teased. "I thought you were, so we got the bedroom."

"Oh, Lance, you just try to make me scared!" She punched his ribs, and was gathered into a bear hug and squeezed, before they started walking on. She was happier, feeling more at home with Lance alone. The women were so quiet, the girl had stared so, and the boys seemed so awkward and shy. Even his father, with his calm dignity, had seemed wary of her.

She would ask no questions, she thought. It would take them time to get to know her. Maybe they could come down to Rivertown and stay sometimes, and get more acquainted. Even later, one or more of the children might come down to live during the hard winter, so they could get more schooling.

They walked for about an hour, then came back. She felt peaceful and at ease. There was something about walking in the hills in the dusk and darkness, with the smell of the pines and the bushes and shrubs, that made her feel better about everything in the world. Lance knew his way, he was never lost in the hills, she thought, and he followed one path and another, winding about, and coming out just where he wanted to. She held his hand, with the warmth of his palm and fingers communicating to her silently his love and his strength and his care of her.

They came back to the cabin, to find the children preparing for bed. They turned in early and got up early in the hills. Lance said, "We might as well turn in," and they went to bed also.

Sarah hoped she would not have to get up in the night. She did not look forward to the prospect of a trip to the outhouse in the darkness—something more formidable than a mouse might be about underfoot.

She did not have to. Lance said, "Sleepy, honey?" She murmured that she did feel a bit weary, and they snuggled under the blankets and went to sleep.

His arm was about her, a sure comfort, and she felt quite at home as long as he was there. She did not try to think how she would have felt in the strange atmosphere if

Lance had not been there. The blankets were rough and scratchy, though warm. The sheets were clean, but not the smooth soft linen she was used to. She heard the children murmuring up above them in the loft; the walls were not thick. Then all was silent, so silent she could hear the rustle of small animals, the crackle of corn-shuck mattresses up there, the wind as it blew eternally about the small sheltered cabin nestled against the rock cliff.

She slept late the next morning. When she awakened, Lance was already up and dressed, combing his hair before the small mirror on the tall dresser. She turned over, and stretched, and he grinned at her through the mirror.

"Feel better, honey?"

"Oh, yes, rested," she said, and yawned widely, stretching.

"Dress warm. It turned cold in the night." And he went out, calling a cheerful howdy to someone.

She got up, made the uncomfortable trip outside to the outhouse, then raced back inside to wash in hot water in the basin which Naomi brought. It was cold, and she pulled on her heavy tweed slacks, a green pullover sweater, and the matching thick green cardigan. It was not too much, even indoors. The cabin seemed to have little heat except for the huge fireplace, now full of a large burning log.

Breakfast was plentiful. The children and adults ate steadily through ham and grits, eggs, biscuits and honey, milk for the children and hot coffee for the adults. The girl leaned back and stretched, and finally gave Sarah a smile which showed two teeth had been lost recently.

"No school today!" she said happily.

Sarah gave her a smile back. "What do you do when there isn't any school?" she asked.

"My chores. Then play. Then read." The little girl answered as gravely and thoughtfully and slowly as the adults, considering each word before letting it come from her pink well-shaped mouth.

Sarah noticed a shelf of books on one wall. There were slim books and fat books, books for children and for adults. A pile of well-worn magazines sat on the table below the shelf. She wondered if Lance had brought them, or if they liked reading anyway, and had done it on their own.

The women rose, and began clearing the table. Sarah

got up to help and was refused, she thought, with some coolness.

"No, you're company," said Lizzy gently.

"I would like to help, since I'm family now," she persisted.

The two pairs of black women's eyes studied her thoughtfully. "Not today," said Lizzy. That seemed to be final.

Lance took her outdoors again. The sun was driving out some of the chill of the January day. They walked in the sunshine. He pointed out where the children had built a playhouse, where they kept the chickens and pigs, and the path the children took to school. Lizzy hung out the laundry at one side of the cabin, from the cabin wall to a couple poles near the evergreens.

"Where do you want to walk, Sary?" he asked, and she realized his speech had fallen into the easy slurring talk of the hills.

"Why not up that way?" She pointed to a steep cliff path.

He looked up, frowned. "No, they're trying to strip up there, ain't safe," he said. "We can go down this way better." And he turned his back to the cliff path, and she followed him silently as he set out in long strides.

Always the strip mining, always the talk of stripping, always the dark looks and pride and coolness where the mining was concerned. It pervaded their lives, she thought, with some resentment.

They walked along the narrow path, Lance ahead of her, she following like a good Indian squaw, she thought, with more resentment. Why had she married a man like Lance? Why hadn't she chosen some suave city man, with the same background as her, with ease of manner, who would take her on vacations to some big city, who would take her to nightclubs and dances, and wouldn't give her a pistol to carry, and teach her how to shoot and kill?

She could have had an easy life, she thought, climbing again as Lance turned off into a side path. She found her way with some difficulty, as the rocks and pebbles and clods of dirt made the walking hard. Her shoes were a bit too fancy for this, but Lance had his calf-high boots on.

She could have married a man who would make her comfortable, and be careful of her, and protective and

wealthy—she stifled a giggle. She could not imagine living in a wealthy home, going out to nightclubs and dances. No, she fit here, even though they didn't seem to think so, she thought happily, and lifted her head to sniff at the pine scents and the shrubs. She halted on the path at some new scent, and Lance finally turned about and came back.

"What is it, Sary?"

"Something that smells good," she said, sniffing. "Peppermint? Is that it?"

He sniffed also, finally nodded. "Yes, it is faint, but it's there. You make a good hill girl," he added, and grinned down at her.

She smiled back, curiously pleased at his compliment. They went on then, hand-in-hand, pausing to look and to listen and to sniff eagerly at scents in the January air. The sky was a bright blue, with only a few white puffs of clouds in it, the evergreens pointing into piercing green peaks, the starkness of the barren trees even more of a contrast.

They came to a clearing, where a few stumps of trees told of some attempt to make a home. There was no trace of cabin, of life. Only grass spread out in a green carpet, even in that wintry scene, and bushes edging the clearing—and the little scurries of animals racing from the humans as they approached.

Lance flung himself down lazily on the grass. "Let's sit."

She sat down beside him, curling her arms about her knees. She gazed down into the thickness of the woods about her, thinking of nothing and everything. It was so peaceful here, just like their honeymoon place, she thought. No wars, no feuds, no hate, no suspicions—

Lance touched her back with a finger, running it down her spine. She thrilled even through two thickness of sweaters. He ran it down again when she did not turn. She finally turned about and gazed down at him. His eyes were a narrowed smoky gray. He was not smiling. She leaned down to him, lay on him, and pressed her mouth to his, opening it.

"Lance," she whispered. "Lance?"

He did not speak. His arms had closed about her, pulling her tightly to his lean body. His mouth was fierce against hers, opened, his tongue lashing into her mouth. She felt the heat rising in him, and the answering heat came up in

her. She moved restlessly, eagerly, pushing herself forward to get closer to him. His big hands moved on her back, down to her thighs, molding them in his, pressing. Then his hands went back to the fastening at her waist. She lifted up so he could unfasten the slacks, and pushed them down, preparing herself for him. It was so fast, she was ready and eager for him, almost at once.

He pushed her gently onto her back, pulling at his own trousers, and came down to her. She scarcely felt any chill on her bare thighs as he moved hungrily to her. His big hands molded her bare thighs, moved inside to finger and touch and press deliberately, until he felt what he wanted. Then he bent closer to her.

She closed her eyes, and began writhing slowly on the grass beneath her. He held her still for a moment, positioned himself, drove home. She gasped, open-mouthed, and welcomed him, her insides fluttering with pleasure. Her hands gripped under his jacket, holding tightly to his shirt, and she pushed herself up at him with an impatience that matched his.

They seemed to flow and crash and melt together in a tense need that both felt at once. She felt him trembling above her, felt his body shaking as he drove again and again, his face pressed to her shoulder as he held himself firmly on her. Her body squirmed deliciously under his, loving the feel of his rough clothes, his smooth body.

He began to slow his pace, and she knew what he was doing. She lay caressing him with her hands, her face pressed to his cheek, while his hands moved slowly under her sweater and found her big ripe breasts. He was deliberately slowing himself to make it last. She opened her eyes, and looked up at the tall trees looming over them, their branches meeting at the top so she could scarcely see the blue sky beyond the piercing tips of the evergreens. How sweet it was to mingle with him under the open sky, under the scented trees, with only quiet and stillness about them.

His thumb played with her nipple, and she tensed with desire. Her stomach muscles seemed to contract again and again, and she pressed upward toward him ardently. Still, he waited, and she finally cried out in a wordless ecstasy, arching under him, feeling wave after wave of release. He

held her closely while she came, then when she lay quiet, he continued his slow deliberate caresses.

She soon came again, arching up, her back in a frenzy to push her up to him, her powerful legs clasp in a scissor grip. "Slow, baby, baby, slow, honey," he whispered.

She could not slow down, and he pressed his face to her throat.

"So sweet, so honey sweet," he murmured against her.

She moaned, deep in her throat, and he pressed himself to her when she reached a second climax. The waves of sweetness rolled through her, and left her limp and arms flung back on the grass.

Still he lay on her, moving slowly deliberately on her, smiling down at her with that wicked look of desire that could heat her on the coldest day. She felt a little chill strike her legs as he moved up a little, then he settled down again.

She put her fingers inside his shirt and caressed his throat. She blew her breath on his ear, and felt him shiver a little, and she smiled. Her hands clasped around his back, and she moved her hands up and down the back, the long lean back, over his shirt. She felt him tensing, heard him give a short groan, then he bent to her again.

Now he began pounding at her, again and again, harder and faster and more wildly. She held him tight, letting him move only a little, holding him inside her, the throbbing inside her setting him off.

And he came hard, inside her, his body shaking in her arms, until he was finished and limp, his breath sobbing in his throat with the intensity of his coming.

Finally he rolled off her, and they both lay quiet, until the chill of the January day reached their heated bodies. She squirmed to pull up her slacks, and he pulled his trousers up, and they smiled at each other in remembered pleasure.

"Why is it better outdoors?" she asked, fastening her slacks.

"More natural here, not so artificial and hot as in a bedroom," he said. "Maybe that's it."

She reached out her palm, and stroked his leg through the trousers from his knee to his thigh and down again.

He leaned over and kissed her, his lips lingering on her

mouth, then moving to her cheek and nose. "Do you want more, honey?" he asked, as simply as he would have asked if she were still hungry after a meal.

She shook her head. "Not now. I just wanted to touch you."

He held her close, until they were both rather chilly from not moving, and they got up. He brushed her off, the damp leaves and grass that clung to her, and then he turned, and she brushed off the leaves from his jacket and trousers. They held hands as they walked slowly back along the paths toward the cabin. She felt full of content, richness, desire fulfilled.

It was noon by the time they returned. Howard Glover was rocking on the porch, his white head erect, his dark gaze on the woods with an absent look. The women were preparing lunch. A laundry hung out on the line. Sarah felt a little pang of guilt, at being so helpless, but they had not seemed to want her to help them.

One of the older boys came running back late for the meal. His mother started to scold him, but he interrupted, "Ma, I was watching them. They's starting to strip above us again! I saw them pulling in dozers!"

As though involuntarily, at once, they all looked toward Sarah. She straightened in her chair, defensively. "I have nothing to do with the stripping," she said, coldly.

"No one said you did, Sary," said her father-in-law, with some of Lance's mildness. "But we been having troubles lately. Thought you should know it, Lance."

"What kind of troubles? They ain't coming up here, are they?"

"Sure air!" Naomi burst out, her black eyes flaming with anger. "Boulder come down on the cabin one night, right at bedtime! Lucky it was a small one, and it rolled off the roof. Might have been hitting the children."

Sarah felt cold and paralyzed, torn from heaven back into the every days of hate and fear. "It can't be my father's men! He isn't coming back this far into the hills!" It was a cry.

The cool dark eyes of her father-in-law rested thoughtfully on her face. "I seen him with the men," he said, gently. "He was a-directing him, that cousin of yours, about where to strip. It ain't my land, I know. But it's

right above me, and they're bound to hit me sooner or late."

"Whose land is it?" asked Sarah. She could not eat. She sat in her chair, feeling miserable and a stranger. The children had turned big dark eyes curiously at her, coldly, reflecting the chill of their elders. She pushed the ham about on her plate, looked with distaste at the pool of maple syrup which she had devoured with such pleasure last night.

"No one owns it," said Lance, quietly, but anger was flaring in his gray eyes, turning them dark. "Everybody knows it is free land. But Pop came back in the hills when they drove him out of his other cabin. You saw the wreck of that place."

She nodded, feeling choked up when she thought of the desolation of the small cabin, the boulders flattening the roof, the wreckage all about. Could it happen again, here? It could, and it was going to.

"When did they start operations here, pop?" asked Lance, of his father.

"About six weeks ago. Decided to tell Billy Glover, and he looked about. They moved in some heavy equipment three weeks later. Reckon come spring they'll start in big. They had trouble with other places. Reckon they figure to start where nobody has a place."

One of the smaller boys said to Sarah, importantly, "Stripping makes a place real awful, miss. You ever see stripping? It tears up good farm land, and rips out the trees. They use machines to rip out the coal, then they leave it, and it's all waste. Ain't nothing growing when they leave. Such a mess!"

It was the longest speech any of the children had made in her hearing. She looked at the small boy, and thought he looked like Lance, with his smoky gray eyes, thick black straight hair, an Indian-slim figure, and eagerness in his small face. What if she and Lance had a son like this? The thought choked her up all over again. A slim boy, with flashing dark eyes, padding about, following his father adoringly. But this boy's father was dead. So was his uncle Robert. And Lance—Lance was the only young man left.

Her gaze turned to her husband with something like despair. She didn't want to lose him—she didn't want the

troubles to separate them. "I don't know anything about stripping," she said, dully.

"Don't your father do it?" asked one of the older boys, one of Robert's boys. He was not belligerent, he sounded curious.

"Yes, but I—I don't have anything to do with it," she said, and felt a curious pain, as though she had rejected the paternal image of her father.

"Sure will be bad if they start stripping in the spring," said Lizzy. She got up to clear away the plate and bring some hot apple pies to the table. Sarah had thought she would help clear. Now she sat still. She did not want to help. She wanted to leave this place, and their prodding, mocking conversation.

They knew she was the daughter of Neville Tallentire. Was this why Lance had brought her up to them? Did he want his family to join him in forcing her to repudiate her father? She would not do it. He was a loving father, as good to her as Howard Glover was to his. They were both protective, stern, watchful. Why should she reject her father because he was a strip miner? A man had to make a living somehow, and her father had been more successful than most men. Should she hate him for that?

Her husband was ripping her apart, she thought, heavily, as thick cream was poured on the pies, cheese wedges set beside them, heavy black coffee poured into thick mugs. Ordinarily, she would have enjoyed the hearty fare. Now she could scarcely touch it. They hated her, she thought.

They hated her. They hated her father. If she did not reject him and turn to them, and help them, they would manage to wreck her marriage. Maybe it was wrecked already. She glanced sideways at Lance's Indian-still face, at the smoky gray eyes as he gazed down thoughtfully at his plate. Had he brought her up here for his own purposes, to convert her to his side—or reject her? Did he mean to force her to choose between her husband and her father?

After the warmth and closeness and sexual delight of the morning, she felt cold and remote. Could Lance do this to a woman he loved? He had married her, she thought he loved her, and his words were tender and gentle. Yet—yet—

He had forced her to give money for the clay factory. He had somehow subtly forced her to get her father to

finance the glass factory. She was pouring her money and time and energy into his projects. And at the same time he was making her doubt her own father, act coldly to him.

Was this why he had married her? So that he and his family could mold her into the way they wanted her to be, to use her for their own purposes? She forced herself to recall their relationship. She had been ripe for picking, she thought bitterly. She had admired him from afar for years. He was an attractive, sensual man, with charm and intelligence.

He had known she was reacting to him. He had taken her up into the hills with him, and a hill man would have known a storm was going to break!

She sat looking at her coffee cup a long time. Yes, Lance would have known a storm was coming. He had taken her deliberately up into the hills, the storm had come, and they had taken refuge in the cave overnight.

And the outcome had been as he had planned, she thought. Public opinion and her own guilt had forced her into an early marriage she had not planned on. Lance had planned it, not she. They had married—and ever since he had forced her into the ways he wanted her to go, and farther from her father.

Even living in the house. He had said at first he wanted a place of their own. But she had wanted to stay with her father, and perhaps he had seen that in the house he could wield a subtle influence on her, driving a wedge between father and daughter, forcing a quarrel neither one of them had wanted.

She had never quarreled with her father—until Lance had come along.

Was this what Lance had planned?

The conversation went on around her. She even managed to murmur a response when a question was addressed to her. They were talking more openly and eagerly about the strip mining, the horrible things that had happened to neighbors, what one had said, what another man had done, a shotgun blast in the night, the violence and terror that came when the strippers wanted their land.

They were mocking, she thought. They mocked her, and her father, and the work of mining. They had brought her up here, and forced her to listen to them. Lance joined in their talk, about the troubles over mining, about what they

would do if the strippers rolled down more boulders over the cliff onto their cabin.

He was advising them to keep their rifles loaded, and teach the boys more about shooting. He told them he would help the boys practice. After lunch he took the four boys out, and held shooting practice close enough to the cabin so they could hear the shots.

Sarah sat on the front porch, wishing she could get away. His father sat and talked, kindly, wisely, about little things, the squirrels and chipmunks, about farming on a slope, about chickens, and dogs, and going to school in the winter. She barely heard him, or noticed the kind worried looks he gave her.

She wanted to run away. But she could not run anywhere in these mountains. Lance would find her and bring her back. She could not escape from him so easily. It hurt and shocked her to think she wanted to escape from her husband.

Chapter Thirteen

Sarah lived somehow through Saturday night and Sunday. On Sunday afternoon, after many silences and awkward remarks, and sidelong glances at her, she packed her suitcase and overnight case and helped carry them out to the car.

Howard Glover came to her as she sat in the car seat. He put his workworn hand on one of hers shyly. "Come again, Sary," he said, his dark eyes, so like Lance's, studying her with the shrewd intuition of the hill man. "We need to get more acquainted. And we'll try to come down to Rivertown."

She managed a smile, avoiding his look. "You do that," she said, too brightly. She sent a smile vaguely in the direction of the two women, the children hovering nearby. "Bye, all."

Lance got in, they set off, down the winding narrow path. Lance was silent for a long time. Finally he said, "You didn't like them." His tone was cold, accusing. "You didn't like coming up here to see them. You didn't enjoy it at all."

All her resentment and pride boiled up. She said curtly, "I did at first, till I saw why you brought me up here."

His body seemed to jerk. He said slowly, "Why was that?"

"You brought me up to let them mock at me, shame me. You thought you could force me to talk to dad about strip mining, let them alone somehow. That was all. You didn't care about me getting to know your folks." The words poured out in an angry tide, washing hate over them both.

"That ain't true," he said quietly. Then he was still again, with the anger of a mountain cat.

She was sorry about the anger later on, but the stillness

went on and on. Lance had his face toward the road, stoically, refusing to look at her. She could think of nothing to say to break the fury, to ease it between them.

They came back to Rivertown, and he drove through the streets without speaking. He pulled into the drive, backed toward the garage, and got out. She got out her overnight case, reached for the suitcase. He took it from her hand, with a little jerk that spoke of continued anger.

He strode ahead of her into the kitchen, said "Howdy," curtly to Mrs. Wilson, and went on into the hall. She followed meekly, sending a little smile to Mrs. Wilson, which evidently did little to reassure the woman.

In the hallway, Neville Tallentire had come out to meet them. His face was dark with worry. "Lance, you're back. Good. Reckon you better get on over to the jail right off."

Lance set the suitcases down carefully at the foot of the stairs. He gazed at Sarah's father. "Why?"

"They—the sheriff—he done arrested Billy Glover for the shooting of Donna Fox."

"Hell and damnation," said Lance gently. He turned and walked back through the kitchen. Sarah dropped her case and ran after him. "Go on back," he said, curtly, the first he had spoken to her in two hours.

"No. I'm coming too." And she followed him out to the car, and swung up into the seat. She had scarcely slammed the door when he was backing out of the driveway with furious speed. "Lance, please—don't drive so fast! We're in town."

"Be quiet," he said.

She gasped, and kept her mouth shut the rest of the trip. She was seething, worried also.

At the jail, he slammed out of the car, and strode into the building. She followed at a run. The sheriff was sitting in the front office, a deputy nearby examining a rifle as though curious as to how it worked. Sarah paused at the doorway and gazed at them all. She was strangely frightened.

Lance said, in a cool drawl that deceived nobody, "I understand you got my first cousin, Billy Glover, locked up here."

"That's right," said the sheriff, coming to his feet. He was a big man, thought Sarah once again. Ehpraim Halli-

well eyed Lance, and Lance eyed him, and the deputy looked from one to the other as did Sarah.

"What's the charge?"

"First-degree murder. That means deliberate."

A long pause as the men measured each other.

"He didn't shoot Donna Fox," said Lance gently. "Ain't like him at all. He don't shoot women."

"Was his rifle, Lance Glover. We proved it by sampling the bullets."

Another long pause. The deputy shifted his feet uneasily. Sarah felt paralyzed, by the feeling of menace and hate and possible violence in that small room.

"I'd like to see Billy Glover," said Lance.

"I'll take you back there. Reckon I have to stay with you, though," said Halliwell.

"Okay with me." Lance followed the sheriff back into the gray hallway. Sarah stayed where she was, holding her breath. She felt perspiration breaking out on her face and the palms of her hands.

Lance came back, followed by the sheriff jingling some keys. Lance nodded to the deputy and went out to the car. Sarah followed him. Lance got in, leaving her to get in by herself, as though he had forgotten or deliberately neglected her.

Before he started the car he gazed up at the jail, looking it over in a curious way. Then he started up, and they drove down the street.

"Won't be hard to get him out," said Lance in that cool deadly drawl she hated. "Jail is like cardboard. Reckon we can use the side wall."

She cried out, "Lance, you won't! That's illegal—it's—oh, Lance, no! You have to let the law do it right."

"They are framing him. Got evidence all stacked up. Caspar Dickey is ready to swear he saw Billy Glover before the riot, on the courthouse lawn, with a rifle. He is a damn liar, and we all know it, but your father is paying him, so he'll say whatever your father wants him to say."

"No, no, no," she whispered, chilling. "Not—my father—he isn't behind—oh, Lance, you must let the facts come out! Billy Glover didn't do it, they will prove it in court."

"It won't come to that. We have to spring him. Or he'll die—accidentally—while trying to escape," said Lance.

"I seen it happen before."

She remembered his brother, Robert, and felt chilled. Lance could die also in this crazy senseless feud. Senseless? It had produced several murders, and could produce more.

"Oh, Lance, please, don't let it go on! Don't let this insane feud turn you into someone else—not the man I loved—please, Lance, you must not do something you will regret forever—please!" She was trying to hold his arm. He jerked it away, and the car swerved dangerously.

"Leave me be! I know where my loyalties are! Reckon you should find out the same about yourself! Loyalty—it's a great thing, Sary! Are you loyal to your dad and his gang? Or are you loyal to the man you married?"

When she gazed up at him, her eyes wide with terror and amazement, he glanced down quickly at her, his gray eyes hard with rage.

He drove into the driveway of her home, slammed out of the car, and strode through the house. He picked up her suitcase and carried it upstairs, leaving his at the landing. She looked helplessly at her father and her cousin Franklin, who had come out of the study at the sounds.

"Did he see Billy Glover?" asked her father anxiously. His face was pallid, his white hair mussed. She was touched to see how white he had become, the brown hair all but disappearing in the thickening white.

"Yes. He talked to the sheriff. He said that Billy Glover was charged with the attempted murder of Donna Fox. But he didn't do it, dad! I know he didn't!"

"You can't know that, Sarah," her cousin said. She didn't look at him, she disliked him, she wanted him out of the house at this tense time. "You couldn't have seen everything that was going on. Too much was happening."

"That's right, Sarah," said her father, in a more gentle tone. "We have to wait for the trial. The truth will come out."

"Not if Billy Glover is being framed. They matched the bullets," she said flatly. "The fact that Billy's rifle was stolen before the riot and returned the following morning—how can he prove that?"

Her father's eyes became more alert, harder. "That happened? That could account—but who would shoot a woman? Who would take the rifle—and deliberately, ahead of time—"

"I don't know, dad." She looked at him anxiously, will-

ing him to find the solution, to figure it out. He had always been so strong and sure and intelligent. He could figure it out, and straighten out the whole mess, she felt sure, if he only would.

"Nonsense," said Franklin Tallentire, briskly. He smoothed his thick, sleek black hair, then carefully smoothed it out again, with a loving hand. "Just a story. No one will believe it. Full of holes."

"They would believe it," she insisted excitedly, "because everyone knows Billy Glover. He would not do such a dirty underhanded thing—he would not shoot a woman, he wouldn't shoot anyone in cold blood—"

"We can't know that, Sarah," said her father, wearily. "You will have to face facts. Just because you love Lance is no signs all of his relatives are admirable. In fact, Billy Glover is a known killer. He is a deadly shot, he had a record in the marines of killings—"

"In defense of our country!" she shot back.

"Sarah, Sarah, when a man has killed once, he will kill again!" She stared at her father, he stared steadily back at her, and she was thinking of Lance, who had killed more than once. A chill gripped her all over again, and she began to shiver.

She realized she had been hearing Lance overhead, his steady footsteps as he moved back and forth across the floorboards. Now he came to the hallway, and down the stairway. She looked up at him, and wanted to cry out. He was carrying another larger suitcase in one hand, and in the other a rifle and shotgun. His face was dark and enclosed and still, as he came down swiftly.

"Lance," she whispered.

Deliberately he set down the heavy case beside the other one, laid the rifle and shotgun on the floor beside them, and came over to the three of them. He looked only at her father.

"You did this to Billy Glover," said Lance, his lips scarcely moving as he spoke the cold words. "You told Caspar Dickey to frame him, and he has. Goddamn you to hell!"

Sarah wanted to move, to cry out, but she could not.

"Now, listen, Lance, I had nothing to do with—" her father began, his voice breaking on the words.

"Don't lie to me, not now! I won't believe you any

more! Caspar Dickey has been in your pay for years. Right?" Lance glared at her father.

Her father flushed slightly, his eyes shifted away. "I don't have to answer that."

Franklin Tallentire broke in. "Of course he doesn't have to answer that! Glover, you are intolerable! You intrude here, you marry a girl you don't love to get at her money, you got her only because you compromised her—she doesn't love you! Why don't you leave? You aren't wanted here, and you'll get no more money from Sarah!"

Lance did not look at Sarah. She was the one who flinched at the crude accusations. She could not speak—she felt numb and shocked and helpless. This could not be happening to her, not to her and the man she loved. It was all a nightmare, an unreal horror.

"I should have known better than to marry a Tallentire," said Lance. "But I thought she had loyalty in her. If not—" and he shrugged, as though indifferent, his face frozen. "I value loyalty above all else," he said, and she knew the words were meant for her, though he did not look at her. He stared steadily at her father. "If she has none for me, I don't need to feel none for her."

She tried to swallow, her throat was dry and raw.

"You need not insult my daughter," said Neville Tallentire, with dignity. "She has done nothing to hurt you. She has been trying to be loyal to both of us. It is impossible. We are on opposite sides of the fence. You persist in using violence to get your own way. And the Glovers will always be violent men. She is well away from you—"

"No—no—" she managed to choke out. Neither man looked at her. They spoke over her head, as though she were invisible.

"She is my wife. She owed me her loyalty first. Forsaking all others," said Lance steadily. "She has got to choose. Maybe she has chosen already. That is up to her. But I'm telling you, Tallentire, I'm on to you. You framed Billy Glover. You and your crew are paying the Jamesons to make trouble. You are stripping above my dad's cabin and sending boulders down on him. I'll stop you if it's the last thing I do on earth. I swear to God."

Sarah shrank back against the wall. She wanted to close her eyes and ears, to run away, to stop listening, to hear nothing that would hurt so much as her husband's words.

They were ripping her to pieces between them. Didn't they care at all? Evidently not.

She pressed her hands to her heart. It was beating so fast it hurt her. Her mouth was open, and she gasped for breath. She could not bear much more.

"You're crazy. You're trying to turn my own daughter against me!" her father cried out. "You know she's the only one I got! You got plenty of relatives! You don't know what it is to have only one left! Goddamn you, Lance Glover, why did you have to be the one to marry her?"

"Fate," he said, with an ironic twist of his mouth. "Some hellish fate. But that's another matter. I got no time for that now. I'm talking about Billy Glover being held in jail for something you planned, you and your twisted cousin here." He flicked a glance at Franklin Tallentire, standing tall and sallow-faced beside Neville. "The two of you been cooking up trouble for a long time. Did you think you would get away with murder for a lifetime?"

The words hung heavily between them.

"You calling me a murderer?" The words came out in a whisper from Neville's pallid lips. "In front of my daughter, you dare to call me a murderer? Damn you, I'm nothing of the sort. I do honest work, which is more than you can say of your hill people! Always fighting the law, always licking up and running their stills, and fighting and shooting and killing—and you dare to call me a murderer? You are the murderer! You have killed plenty! You'll kill again before you're through!"

Lance's hand lifted, then became a fist, and dropped to his side. His cheekbones were tinged with red, his smoky gray eyes blazed fire. "Maybe I will at that," he whispered, and turned away from them.

"Lance!" cried Sarah, in an agony. She could not move from the wall. She held out a limp hand toward him.

He glanced at her, hesitated. "I'm going over to Billy's home to look after his family while he is in jail. You want me, you know where I am," he said. He picked up the two suitcases, the rifle and shotgun, and started for the back door.

The three of them watched him go. Sarah felt such desolation and illness that she wanted to vomit. It could

not be happening, it could not be happening to her, not between her and the man she loved and had married.

At the kitchen door, he hesitated, turned about, bumping one of the suitcases awkwardly against the frame. "Sary, you carry your pistol where you can get at it. You hear me?"

She could not answer in words. She nodded dumbly. He stared at her steadily, a long moment, then turned and went away. She heard the door crashing after him. And he was gone.

"Pistol!" said her father. "What is that about, Sarah?"

"He—he gave me a pistol," she said, dully. "He taught me to use it."

"Well, that is the last straw!" he burst out. "Sarah, I don't want you carrying and using a gun! Is he trying to turn you into a killer also?"

"Dad, he isn't a killer." She could not fight any longer. She turned wearily toward the stairs.

"You give me that gun and let me put it away where it's safe!" he said, coming after her toward the stairs. He put his hand gently on her arm. "Honey," he said in a lower tone. "Forget about him. Lance isn't for you. He is a violent hill man. I should never have let you marry him."

She gave him a wan smile, shook her head, her face crinkling up. "I'm going to lie down, dad—I'm tired. So tired." She went on up the stairs, and to her bedroom. She closed and locked the door.

She lay down on the bed. The closet door was open, and she saw Lance had taken most of his clothes with him. She shut her eyes, but could not shut out the sight. Lance had left her.

He had left her. Lance, her husband, who had held her so tenderly and made love with such gentleness only yesterday. Coming to her, and turning her, and moving on her, and kissing her, and telling her about his love with his lips and his hands and his strong hard legs and thighs—

"Oh, God," she whispered, and turned her face into the pillow in an agony of desolation.

She tried to lie quietly, but her body kept shifting restlessly on the soft bed, the bed where she had lain with her husband in such happiness and joy and pleasure. She missed him already. Her arm went out to his side of the bed, and her hand felt for him as though wishing might

bring him back. But it did not. The bed remained empty and the room was still. No big man roaring about, laughing or angry or loving or simply roaring, because he was late in the morning and she hadn't awakened him in time, and what kind of wife was she who made a man late for work, then coming to her and kissing her hungrily and making them even more late—

Behind her closed lids, the painful hot tears trickled down over her cheeks.

She tried to think, but she was too weary and emotionally drained. There was something dreadfully wrong, and she could not figure it out.

She knew and trusted her father. He was not a murderer. He would not pay a man to kill. Yet she knew Lance, too, or thought she did. Could he kill? Was he the kind who would rage around about Billy Glover's innocence, knowing all the time that Billy had killed? Or had Lance killed? Or someone Lance knew, and was protecting?

She was all mixed up. She could not think straight. She knew that her father or Lance had done something, but she could not figure out why or what. Who was lying? Which one deserved her loyalty?

Lance had driven a deep bullying wedge between herself and her father. Yet—yet she could not believe her father could hire a killer. Who then? Who had tried to kill Donna Fox? Who had shot out of the dark? Was it Billy Glover, ex-marine, deadly shot, looking so innocent and strong and good? Could it be Billy after all?

The sheriff was a smart man, for all his fence-riding. He would know that there was good evidence against Billy Glover, or he would not have arrested the man. He must have had good reason to make the arrest, good reason to hold him for trial.

Loyalty—Lance's words had stung her cruelly. But to whom did she really owe her loyalty? To her husband, whom she trusted for a time? Or to her father, who she had trusted all her life? To Billy Glover, to Howard Glover, to the Glover side of the feud? Or to the Tallentires, and all their friends and clan, to the Jamesons, though she did not trust them?

She twisted on the bed, tossed about, her brain dull and feverish. She could not think clearly. She was so torn and

crushed by all that had happened, after the difficult week-end with Lance's family.

Why had they acted like that to her? They had been cautiously friendly at first, then bursting out about strip mining and danger and shooting and all that. Didn't they accept her as Lance's wife? Evidently not. She was the enemy. The enemy, because she was the daughter of Neville Tallentire, a strip miner.

But she was proud of her father, who had worked hard, had pulled himself up from the dirt of being a hill man with a vegetable patch. He had struggled to pay for his first dozer, to build up a good business, to make it pay. He deserved the beautiful house he had built for himself and his family, and he deserved the money he had earned with his own long hours of work, and the work of the men he had hired and trained.

Mrs. Wilson came up later with a tray of tea. Sarah called out, "No, thank you, Mrs. Wilson. I'm tired. I'm going to bed."

"Dear heart, you need something hot," said Mrs. Wilson, as though tea would cure anything.

"No, thank you."

Mrs. Wilson went away. Neville Tallentire came up, his boots heavy on the stairs.

"Sarah? Let me in, daughter."

She finally got up and let him in. He looked at her, and put his hand tenderly on her cheek. It was such an unusually tender gesture for him that tears came again to her eyes.

"Poor child. We have been ripping you apart between us," he said. "I never meant for this to happen. But we must manage somehow to work it out. Come down to supper now."

"Dad, I don't want to—I don't want to talk to anybody—" Her voice shook.

"Franklin went back to the mine office to work," he said, mildly. "It's just you and me. Come on down, we won't talk, we'll just eat and have tea and watch the news. I understand the president is going to make a speech tonight. Maybe he'll say something smart for a change."

She smiled wanly, and he was encouraged. He tucked her hand into his arm, and they went down the stairs.

They ate in silence. Mrs. Wilson bustled about, urging

her to eat a bit more beef, a little more mashed potatoes and gravy, and a little more of the frozen peas. Weren't they much better than canned? And have a little of the ice cream, Sarah, and some chocolate sauce, and a little cookie—

She did feel better, though her heart kept pounding and aching whenever she thought of Lance walking out on her that way. When she thought of his straight back as he marched out the door, holding two heavy suitcases as though they were knapsacks, and the rifle and shotgun as though he meant to go off to war—she hurt so much she wanted to cry all over again.

Lance was going to war, his own war, fighting it his way. And the thought scared her badly. She could not think whether he was right or wrong, whether she owed him her loyalty or owed it to her father. All she knew was that she hurt badly whenever she thought of Lance getting killed—or killing someone himself.

Chapter Fourteen

The days dragged past, the weeks also. Sarah was frantic with anxiety at first, for fear that Lance would try to arrange Billy Glover's escape.

Her father found out things, told her in a gentle manner that showed his deep concern for her.

"The sheriff has moved Billy Glover to the county jail. Figured it would be safer, so no one would try to spring him," he said, one afternoon.

Another time he told her that Lance was stocking up on grocery supplies for Billy Glover's family. The grocery had been shot at, some windows smashed, and Lance figured it might close up.

Another time he said that Lance was in the corner drug-store buying some medicine. "It seems that Billy's oldest boy is sick," said her father. "Reckon they do need him over there, honey."

She felt a little comforted, but not much. She saw Lance every day at school, but they did not speak to each other. He would have to speak first, she thought proudly. Over the heads of the students going down the hall, she would see Lance coming toward her, and her heart would seem to stop. Then he would nod, and go past, his face hard, and she would turn away blindly.

Annie Kistler was catty about it. "You and Lance quarreled already, Sarah? My, that was fast! Reckon the feud would tear you apart."

"He's looking after Billy Glover's family," said Sarah, with quiet calm, chewing her cheese sandwich as though she wanted it.

"Sure, sure. All the time," said Annie, laughing a little, her malicious gaze searching Sarah carefully. "You don't even speak, do you?"

"Let her alone," said Jean Lawrence, her worried gentle

eyes going from one to the other. "It's her business. The times are troubled; don't add to her worries."

"She got worries when she married someone on the other side of a feud," said Annie flatly. "She should have known better. The Jamesons are beholden to the Tallentires, I reckon they mean to pay their debts."

"What do you mean by that?" asked Sarah, putting down her sandwich and staring. "Say what you mean, Annie Kistler! Don't beat around me with words!"

Annie shrugged and looked uncomfortable. "Just talk. Forget it," she said, and got up hastily, leaving her tray half full.

Sarah shrugged, thinking that Annie was making trouble, and tried to forget the incident. They had a teachers' meeting that afternoon, and she went with Jean Lawrence. The seat on her other side at the back of the hall was empty.

She saw Lance come in late, look about, see the chair beside her, and look away. She stared straight ahead, aching. Then someone came up behind her, and slid quietly into the chair. She knew who was there without turning. It was Lance, his long legs stretching out easily, his hand searching his pocket for his cigarettes.

Her hands clenched on her pocketbook. She would not speak first. He was the one who had walked out.

She didn't hear a word Orson Bowman was saying, until he got to the game that night. ". . . expecting trouble, with all the feuding going on and Billy Glover in jail over at the county seat," he was saying.

Sarah jerked in her chair. She felt Lance looking over at her sideways, but she would not turn around and look back. She gazed down, and out of the corner of her eye she saw Lance's big hand lying on his knee, the cigarette curling smoke up from it. She wanted to touch his wrist, to reach out and take hold of him, and beg him to come back. Pride kept her quiet. His hand was so big and sturdy, with black hairs on the back and on the thumb. How often had she held that hand in bed, while he was stroking it over her, and she had ached with desire, and wanted him to come, come to her.

Orson droned on about possible troubles, complaining about the feud, outlining procedures they all knew by heart, if there was a riot at school or in the gym. Then he

finally left the subject, and went on to the school finances and a special tax levy on the ballot for April.

The meeting was finally over. Sarah sat there, waiting for Lance to say something. He stirred, got up. She glanced up at him anxiously, waiting. He looked in her eyes, nodded, left her.

She felt Jean Lawrence put her hand over hers. "Oh, honey," said Jean.

"Don't say anything," said Sarah, unexpectedly angry. She got up, and went out alone to the parking lot. Across the way she saw Lance get into his car, and drive out without a backward look toward her.

He did not speak to her the next week, or the next. The pain in her heart deepened. She could scarcely speak to her father or her cousin of anything sensible. Her mind was all wrapped up in what Lance was doing—did he miss her, did he think of her, did he want her, had he forgotten her?

She loved him deeply. She came to realize that, in the quiet desolation of the nights without him, when she lay awake and wanted him near her. Not even touching her, just near her, and there, just there, where she could see him and listen to his breathing.

She would turn on her stomach and try to sleep, and the thought would jerk her awake, "Is he awake? Is he thinking of me; missing me? Or is he glad to be out of this house, away from me? Has he decided to divorce me?"

She shuddered at that horrible thought. She pressed her face against the pillow. It was warm, uncomfortable, even in January. It wasn't Lance's shoulder, or his arm, or his hard even chest, with the thick hairs matted on it.

She missed him bitterly. It was strange how rapidly she had come to depend on a man, to need him, to want him. She thought of his love-making, so sweet, so gentle, then so wild and satisfying and thorough. She thought of his big hands learning her soft silken body, the roughness of his fingers and the calluses on the palm as he stroked over her thighs, the thrill of the contact when he touched her. She thought of his big body leaning over hers, crushing her a little until he remembered and let up a bit.

The song, "I've Grown Accustomed to Her Face," made her ache.

The nostalgic songs of the hill people on television hurt

her. They always sang about the man who had gone away, leaving them to grieve.

She got up and abruptly left the room one evening, when the singer on television started singing a medley of sad songs about the man who went away.

Her father called after her, but she ran up to her bedroom, and shut the door and wept. She could not bear it.

She loved Lance so much, and he had walked out on her. She loved him deeply, fiercely, she wanted him badly—physically, mentally, emotionally.

She missed him greatly, missed his arms about her in bed, missed him sitting across the dining-room table from her, missed him across their study table, growling over the papers he was grading. She missed his sudden sweet smile at her, the mischief in his slanting eyes. She missed his unexpected touch on her hips, when he was signaling that he wanted her. She missed riding to school with him in silence, riding home, and talking about the students and the day. She missed his kisses, the scratchy feel of his unshaven chin against her breasts, missed his hands on her, missed his caresses and his love-making, his anger, his love, his violence, and his loyalty.

She couldn't eat much. Mrs. Wilson worried about her, aloud, her father silently. "You got to eat more, you're nothing but skin and bones now. You know Lance likes his woman plump, Sarah! Come on, now, a little potato—" Mrs. Wilson urged her.

Tears stung her eyes. "No, thank you. I'm not hungry." And she fled to her room again.

One evening, she went over to see Jeannie Frasier. The thought was in her mind that, by chance, Lance might happen by, then they could meet, and speak, and it might break the ice.

She parked at the house, and looked eagerly at the next car. But it was the dusty old car that Martin Seidman drove. She sighed, and went up to the door.

Adam Wisniewski opened the door to her, and beamed down at her. "Mrs. Glover! How nice to see you today!"

She could have hugged him for calling her Mrs. Glover. It made her seem to belong a little bit again to Lance.

"How are you? Am I interrupting? I hadn't been over, I wanted to know how things were going—" She went in past him, and her hungry gaze swept the room swiftly to

make sure that Lance was not there. She felt empty again. He was not there.

Jeannie greeted her warmly. They showed her some new designs, some finished vases which had been popular. Adam told her eagerly about the progress of the glass works. They would be ready to begin work in earnest in a few more weeks, he announced proudly. Already the men were practicing with glass blowers.

Sarah sat down, then jumped up to make coffee for the workers. Martin was going over some papers at the side table. Jeannie and Adam were working in clay and drawings on the large table.

She brought coffee to each of them, warmed and comforted a little by their easy welcome and acceptance of her. She wondered that she had ever been afraid and uneasy in the presence of Martin and Adam. They were so calm, so natural and fine. It didn't matter any more that Martin wore his hair long and shaggy, that Adam spoke broken English sometimes when he got excited, that they wore shabby clothes.

She asked about Donna, and was told that the hospital in the East had sent a good report, but she would be in hospital for another month, at least. Jimmy was taking care of the children. Two other welfare workers were expected in a month, but no one had arrived yet.

"In fact, they might not come at all, if your father has his way," said Martin, a little angrily, setting down his papers. He shoved back his thick black horn-rimmed glasses and gazed at her earnestly. "Do you know why he wrote to the government and asked them not to send any more welfare workers here?"

Sarah froze, and stared at him. "My father—did that? Oh, no," she gasped. She tried to think. "Why—he was saying only last week that it was too bad Donna Fox wasn't here to help. Three of the pregnant girls were needing her advice—oh, I know dad did not do that!"

They stared back at her, Jeannie's face thoughtful. "You know, Sarah, don't be angry," she said, in her gentle way. "I have been thinking recently that your cousin Franklin Tallentire is doing some things and signing your father's name to the papers. Did you know that the pension checks were going out with your father's name on them—but it isn't your father's signature?"

"What?" Sarah stared at her. "What—did—you—say?"

Jeannie repeated her words patiently, a little color in her thin cheeks. "You see, my second cousin, Elizabeth, works in the bank as a teller. I shouldn't repeat this, but she was worried. When the checks started coming in, she phoned the mine office. She said the signature was not Neville Tallentire's, and wanted to know if they should be cashed. Your father said to go ahead, that Franklin was making out checks for him."

"But not signing them—it isn't like dad." She frowned, more worried than she wanted to admit, details nagging at her. "Are you sure she talked to dad?"

"She said she thought he sounded like he had a cold."

"He hasn't had a cold since a winter two years ago," said Sarah flatly.

The two women stared at each other. Sarah clasped her hands in her lap. Adam drank his coffee placidly, looking from one to the other.

"Have you considered the possibility, Mrs. Glover, that your cousin Franklin Tallentire wants the mines very badly? That he might be willing to cheat your father to get them?"

She stiffened at Adam's calm words. "No, I hadn't, Adam." She fought to remain calm. "He came here three years ago to work, to be the manager as dad got older. But he doesn't inherit the mines, I do."

"But if you inherit them—with Franklin in as manager—he can do whatever he wants, can't he?" asked Adam. "Forgive me, Mrs. Glover. I'm afraid this is important to us. Things have happened which I thought were out of character for your father to have done. Is it possible that your cousin is doing them in your father's name—but without his knowledge?"

Sarah moved her stiff lips, but no sound came.

The telephone rang, and Martin went to answer. It made Sarah realize that a phone had been installed in Jeannie's home. That the girl looked even better than she had before, that she was glowing with new radiance.

She studied Adam and Jeannie curiously under her lashes. The smiles that passed between them, the easy way they spoke, in half sentences, in phrases, that spoke of an understanding and meeting of minds. And the radiance in Jeannie's face.

Did they love each other? Oh, if Jeannie were hurt—as Sarah had been hurt—to love, and have the man walk out. . . .

It is an unbearable hurt, Sarah wanted to warn Jeannie. Yes, you want to love and have a man, but what if he walks out on you? Can you endure it? Can the pain be made up for by the times of pleasure that came before? I don't know . . . I don't know.

Martin finished his conversation, and went out to the kitchen. On impulse, Sarah followed him. He was attempting to fix more coffee, but yielded the pot to her with a helpless grin. He lounged against the kitchen table, and watched her work.

"Martin, I wanted to talk to you," she said soberly, when the pot was on the stove.

"About two things," she added, thinking he wouldn't care for either topic.

He nodded. "Shoot," he said, folding his arms, and looking down at her with his intelligent brown eyes.

She drew a deep breath. "I don't usually interfere in other people's affairs. But—Jeannie has been a friend of mine. I have known her for years. I don't want her hurt any more than she has been." She paused, got out some sandwich bread, and butter and meats.

"Shoot again."

"I mean, Adam," she said, nervously, not looking up at him. "I expect he will go away before long, when you both leave. You welfare people come and go, don't you?"

"Usually," he said.

"When he goes, Jeannie will be alone again. If he—if he makes advances to her—I don't see how he can—she is crippled—but, Martin—"

"I get you," he said. "You don't have to spell it. Look, Sarah, it's like this. Jeannie is crippled. So is Adam. During the troubles in Czechoslovakia, they got him, imprisoned him. His wife and son were murdered. Adam was tortured. I don't want to explain how, but it was in his genitals."

She caught a sharp painful breath, and stared at him. Martin was frowning down at his cigarette.

He added slowly, "Adam had resolved not to marry again. Who would want a man like that, unable to have normal relations, that was what he thought. Then he met

Jeannie, and discovered that sex and genitals and all that aren't so important when you meet a girl who is gentle and lovely and intelligent. Do you understand what I mean? I think he wants to marry her. I think eventually he will persuade her to marry him. And I'm going to be best man. I've set my mind on that," and he grinned down at her, with a twinkle in his eyes.

"Oh—Martin—" she said. "I'm sorry—yet so glad—for them both—"

"The right answer isn't the same for everybody in the world. You know that, don't you? Different people have different needs. They need each other, I am convinced of that. I like good marriages," he added, with a little sigh. "I've seen a hell of a lot of bad ones. When I see a good one, I am almost convinced it is worth it! My mother has been after me for years to marry. I tell her, God, mama, not the bitches I see about me! Save me from them! Then I see a good marriage, and I am almost converted. Not completely, you get me. But almost. Maybe I'll find a good Jewish girl, like you or Jeannie or Donna, and I'll fall down and worship her, by God, I will." His tone was suddenly fierce and serious.

She stared down at the sandwich bread. Her hands seemed to proceed automatically, without orders from her aching head.

"Mine isn't so good, Martin," she said, in a low tone. "You know—Lance has left me."

"To take care of Billy Glover's family," he said, very gently. "He'll be back."

"I don't know. We quarreled. We went to see his father and sisters, and he—he said I didn't like them. I did, that is, I would have, if they had given me a chance. Instead, they got after me because of my father, and the stripping. I felt horrible. I can't do anything about my father's work, you know that, Martin," she added, pleadingly.

"Maybe you can eventually. But I don't think that is what is bothering Lance," he said, frowning a little, his dark brows drawing together. "I've been talking to him. He is bugged. You know, something is wrong, Sarah. Something is mighty wrong. He tells me about your father, and you know Lance does respect and like him. He told me so, then he says, 'But I can't figure out the bastard.

How can he be like that, and do the damn things he does?" "

She stopped pretending to work and turned to face Martin fully. He was a smart man; maybe he could work it out. "That is the second thing I wanted to ask you about, Martin. What is wrong? My father is incapable of doing vicious things. He would never never hire a man to kill a woman! He is incapable of that! He would not strip mine where children are buried! I know that now. He would not send boulders down on a man's cabin, and take the chance of killing them inside. Who is doing it? Who is acting in my father's name?"

The words burst from her. Martin stared at her a long moment.

The silence in the kitchen went on and on, but it didn't bother her. She could almost see the wheels turning in his mind, his clever mind, his kind, thoughtful experienced mind.

"Well, Sarah," he said, very slowly, carefully. "I guess there are several possible answers. Let's look at them all, without getting mad, shall we?"

She sat down on the kitchen chair. She had a feeling she would need support. "All right, Martin, shoot."

He grinned a little at her borrowed phrase. Then he lit another cigarette, and thought over it, the smoke curling lazily between his fingers.

"First, your father," said Martin. "He could be double-faced. He could be kind to you and protective toward you—because you are his daughter. I have known some real criminal-type bastards who treated their own sons and daughters like they were rare jewels to be polished and set in gold. And they went out and committed burglaries and rape and murder to keep them in gold. It does happen, Sarah."

She wet her lips. They felt dry and parched. "All right, it could happen," she accepted it.

"Okay. Second, hold on, Sarah. It could be Lance Glover. You know, he's been going up to the mine office. I saw him up there a couple times at night. He was looking at the books in the office."

She stared at him, and felt faint. "Oh—no—no—Martin—no—not Lance—"

"Yep, Sarah. Lance. I saw him, so did Adam. We didn't

ask him about it, figured he was up to his own business. But he was there. And he was working in the office at the books. Seemed to have his own keys. He locked up when he left."

She pressed her hand to her heart. It was thumping wildly. She felt sick and weak. It could not be—it could not—but Lance had gone up there to the mine office, without telling her, and for what purpose? Would Martin lie? She looked up at his face, a question in her own.

"Are you lying to me?" she asked. "Please, Martin, please, don't lie to me."

"I'm not lying," he said, quietly. "Look, honey, I like Lance. He seems to be a good guy. But he is a goddamned tough bastard, I'll say that. If he wasn't on my side, I'd be scared to meet him in a dark alley! But I figure he would fight fair. That's all I can say, except that I think he's all right. Seems little enough to tell you. Just a feeling I have."

She sat there limply, and Martin smoked in silence, his dark brows drawn over his brown eyes. She was getting a lot more than she had bargained for, she thought, in a daze. Finally she braced herself.

"All right, Martin, accepted. Any other possibilities?"

"Good girl," he said. "Okay, honey. Another possibility. Your cousin, Franklin Tallentire. I don't like him, so this may be tinged with personality. But I have a hunch he is writing more checks than your father knows about. And he is damn chummy with the Jamesons. And Caspar Dickey is having dinner with him at roadhouses about ten miles out in the country every few nights. One of our girls works out there, and she told me."

She digested this strange information in puzzled silence. How could Franklin write checks? Her father owned the mines. And Caspar Dickey? And his lying testimony about Billy Glover—if it was a lie?

She rubbed her forehead. "I wish," she said aloud, "I could tell who was lying and who wasn't—"

"If you know right off, get yourself a job with the FBI. You'll be a smash, honey," said Martin, with a grin. "Okay, ready for more?"

She sighed, and nodded. "I might as well get it all at once. Maybe one shock will counteract the other. Oh, Martin, I did need to talk to someone about this! I've had it all bottled up inside me, eating away like poison!"

"I know what you mean. I've been there a few times. Well, another possibility. Do you know Daniel Jameson?"

She frowned. "I know he is one of the Jamesons. I think I know him by sight."

"Well, don't call him up and invite him to dinner to make his acquaintance. He is a cold psychotic killer."

"Psychotic?" she asked, feeling as though she could never be shocked again, yet getting another shock. "Isn't that when a person is insane?"

"Right. A psychopath has no sense of evil. He can smile at you and talk nice, and bang, pow! He'll hit you on the kisser and keep on smiling. Met a guy like that, seemed so nice, until he raped one of our girls, and tried to kill her with a knife. Talked real nice afterward, tried to reason with me while I was working him over. Said it helped him to kill, it made him feel nice, and he liked the feel of a girl under his knife."

"My God, Martin!" She jumped up. The coffeepot was boiling over while she was gazing up at him. She rescued it, almost burning her fingers. "Are you kidding me?"

"Nope. I reckon I've seen some life you haven't, and I hope you never do, Sarah. But, listen, that Daniel Jameson is a real killer, the mean cold kind, the kind who knows no evil because he is all evil. Mental illness, I guess, but you don't want to tangle with him. I think the family keeps him bottled up in the hills until they want him for a job, then they turn him loose. I am wondering if he was near the courthouse that night. The job would be his type," he said, thoughtfully, and took the coffeepot from her.

"Any other possibilities?" she asked, thinking she could not stand much more.

"No, other than Adam and Martin," he said, with a little grin. "We have our own motives, you know. But not for killing. We go in more for curing."

She touched his hand. "Thank you. Yes, I understand. You do cure, don't you?"

"We give it the old college try, honey. How about bringing the sandwiches?"

She ate sandwiches with Jeannie and Martin and Adam, drank coffee, and felt lighter within herself, though she had infinitely more fuel for her worrying. At least, she was having help with the problem, she thought, and was in-

tensely grateful to Martin. I hope he does find some nice Jewish girl, she thought, studying his face as he laughed at something Adam said. What a fine man he is, a nice husband, a good father, if he just finds the right girl.

When she was ready to leave, she went over to Jeannie. "Be happy, Jeannie," she said, in an undertone.

"Oh—can I?" the girl said, understanding at once, her face shadowing. "I never thought—you know—"

"Yes. But you know what marriage is—when two people need each other, and fulfill each other. Liking as well as loving. Good luck, honey," she added, still in an undertone.

"I don't know if I have the right to—not like I am—"

"Forget about rights. Be happy." She smiled at them all, said good night, and went home more happily than she had felt for almost a month.

Chapter Fifteen

Early February brought snow and cold, worst of all, ice. The ice worried the teachers and students and parents. It made the town roads bad. Out in the hills, it was murder. The school bus went off the road on Thursday, and plunged over a cliff. Two children were hurt and the bus driver injured.

On Friday morning, everyone was on edge. The prediction was for more snow, a storm out of the west.

Orson Bowman went around the building at one-thirty, and started sending everyone home.

"Ain't no sense asking for trouble. The school buses will be ready when you kids are. You git on out there, and git home. And don't come in Monday if it ain't safe! Your education won't do you no good dead," he said.

They seemed to agree with him, thought Sarah, with some amusement through her worry. Orson Bowman was a very practical man—first things first.

By two-thirty, her classrooms were clear, and she could leave. She drove home with great caution, frowning and tense over the wheel, until she had crept into her own driveway and back to the garage.

She noticed that Caspar Dickey's car was parked in front of the house, and she frowned. She hated that man, his oily ways, his sneaky eyes, the way he looked her up and down.

She went into the house through the kitchen. Mrs. Wilson had gone home to take care of a sick niece. The house seemed so quiet without her—and without Lance.

She flinched at the thought of her absent husband. Absently, she started for the stairs, then heard the murmur of voices.

She paused. Something drew her to the front hall, and she stopped in front of her father's study door. She did

not hear her father's voice, and she had not seen his car in front. Who was using his study?

She listened at the door, frowned, bent closer, her eyes widening. She could not believe the fragments of phrases she heard.

Caspar Dickey said, clearly, ". . . father—don't know what happened—dynamite—all hell will break loose! Damn it, I won't get elected if my name gets connected—"

"You won't get elected again if you don't do what I say! You won't be around here, come election!" It was her cousin's voice, Franklin Tallentire's, clear and cold and final. Hard as she had rarely heard it, so sure was he of himself.

". . . don't like violence—killing—that Daniel Jameson scares the hell out of me—"

". . . turn him loose on you if you don't quit yelping about it—damn it!—do what I say. Old Tallentire will be out soon enough—you do what I say and you have no worry!"

Sarah froze. Nothing could have pried her away now. She bent closer, listening, straining to catch every word.

The voices had lowered, murmured. She could not hear, and she wanted to stamp her foot in impatience.

"Dynamite—this afternoon—right away—blame it on the storm—Lance Glover will rave—no proof—finish him—damn his guts, interfering. No one will believe—" It was Caspar Dickey's whining voice.

"Serve him right, meddling with the books! Looking over the accounts—good thing Jameson saw him, reported—we'll fix him—get his father and sisters, he'll think twice about meddling."

The voices lowered again. Sarah unfroze from the key-hole, and tiptoed to the stairs. She felt light-headed, in a daze. This afternoon, something would happen to Lance's father. What? Something connected with dynamite . . .

She went up to her bedroom and sat on the side of the bed. Though Lance had left, the room seemed full of his presence. She felt as though she could reach out her hand and touch him.

"What is it, Lance?" she whispered aloud. "What is it? What can I do?"

Clearly, she could hear him in her head. "Strip mining,

boulders over the cliff, smashing in the roof. If the children had been there—”

“Oh, dear God,” said Sarah. She got up, and went to look at her pistol. She loaded it, with shaking fingers, and put it in her pocketbook. Her car wouldn’t make it; it needed some repairs. What could she do? Drive up that icy road? And how? Could she reach Lance? But what if it wasn’t true?

She went to the upstairs phone, and phoned Billy Glover’s house. She waited and waited, hearing the ringing. No one answered.

She bit her lips. This afternoon—she must hurry—it might be too late now.

She heard a car door bang. She ran down the stairs, her coat over her arm. Her father came in from the kitchen, his face lighted when he saw her.

“Have to go out, dad, and my car is bum. Can I borrow yours?” She said it lightly, gaily.

“Sure, honey.” He handed her the keys. “Look, it may snow, and it’s a bit icy. Go easy and stick to the main roads, will you?”

She smiled at him, and kissed his cheek. She wasn’t going to tell him what she was up to. “Thanks, dad,” she said, and ran on out to the car.

He had a big heavy car, and the snow tires were on. She started it, checked her pocketbook and the pistol nervously, laying the purse beside her on the seat. Then she backed out, noticing that Caspar Dickey’s car was gone. She wanted to think over that talk with Franklin, but she couldn’t waste time and energy now. She must get up to Lance’s father’s place—

Oh, God, she thought. Do I know the roads? She frowned, thinking, and drove more slowly to the edge of town. If she went carefully, she would not miss the way.

She kept biting her lips nervously. The roads were icier the farther she got from town. She left the main road, and started up into the hills. She was sure sometimes, other times, she wasn’t so sure she was on the right track. Then she would see a landmark, a cabin, and remembered, and go on.

It took longer than the two hours that Lance had driven. She kept glancing at her watch. Three-thirty, four, four-

thirty. She was closer, but when would they strike? It would get dark early. Would they wait until dark?

She was shaking with nervousness when she finally pulled into the small turnaround in front of the cabin. She jumped out, ran into the place. Dusk had settled, the family was gathering about the table.

She saw the dark unfriendly faces of the two sisters, surprise on their faces, in the hard turns of their bodies as they looked at her. She saw the quick alert faces of the children. She turned to Lance's father, and saw a welcome.

"Well, Sary," he said, in his calm drawl. "What brings you up here?"

"Trouble," she said bluntly. "I overheard talk—you all must get out right away. Come on—quick!"

"What is this all about?" asked one of the sisters.

"Dynamite—boulders—I don't know. But they mean to attack this afternoon! Oh, please—place, come!" She tugged at the arm of Howard Glover.

He stared down at her, his big gentle hand pressing on hers, his hand so like Lance's, with warm strength and calluses and firmness.

"It's a trick. Her father sent her up here to get us out!"

"Where would we go? There's no where to go—"

The two sisters chatted in distress. The children were poised alertly, ready to stay or flee, as the adults decided.

"We'll go," said Howard Glover. "Sary wouldn't have driven up here in the ice and snow if it wasn't important. Come on, children, git!"

He spanked the nearest one lightly on the rump, and sent them all scampering.

"My clothes! My best silver!" cried Naomi.

"I can't go yet—got to pack up—take the food—take the chillen's stuff!" cried the other woman.

"No, no, don't wait!" Sarah screamed out, pounding her fist unconsciously against Howard Glover's arm. "Please—it may be too late—they are going to dynamite—I don't know when, only it is this afternoon—"

"Naomi, git the car. Kids, jump in, either car—only git out of here. Lizzy, stop your wailing and running about like a fool chicken and git out of here!" Howard Glover commanded, and they obeyed.

They ran out to the two cars, piled in, and Sarah started up. She drove recklessly, turned the car, and started

down the icy path. Howard had seated himself beside her, leaning forward alertly, his head tilted.

They drove down the path, onto the main road. Then they heard it.

"Stop the car," said Howard, firmly.

Sarah stopped the car, and opened the door on her side to listen. It sounded like a storm out of the east, over the tops of the mountain range. A rumble, ominous, continuing, another long rumbling, another—

And the cliff seemed to rise up like dust in the air, rising high in the air, then falling, slowly, slowly. She stared up in fascination, getting out of the car finally to see better. Howard got out and came around to stare up with his eagle-proud eyes.

"They done dynamited the ledge above the cabin. Boulders coming down like pebbles," he said, in a gentle drawly tone that reminded her of Lance's cold deadly drawl. "Would have been killed, sitting there at our supper, I reckon, Sary."

"Oh, God, pop!" she said, and he put his arm about her as she started to cry. She was so relieved, yet still so terrified. "Oh, God, God—"

"Wasn't your dad, was it, Sary?" he said, very gently.

She shook her head violently. "No, no, not him—not him—he wasn't there—oh, dear God—"

The children had hopped out of the car and were staring upward at the cloudy sky, at the showering of dust and boulders coming down. They were still close enough to hear the crashing as the huge rocks hit trees—and their cabin. The two women looked in silence, too stunned to weep.

The tallest boy said to his grandfather, "Grandpop, we sure had a close one!"

"Never have a closer one, son," he said. "Down on your knees, all of you. We're gonna thank God right now for what he done for us. Down on your knees."

And he got down on his sturdy knees, and lifted up his white head and prayed aloud. The women got down, Sarah next to Lance's father, and the children dropping where they stood and bending their heads obediently.

"Oh, Lord of the storms and the thunder, and Lord of the rains and the mountains, we thank thee today for a miracle of love that done saved us. We thank thee for our

Sary who come and saved us from death and destruction. We thank thee, Lord, for thy goodness and mercy to us. Continue to preserve and help us, oh, Lord, and we will be grateful forever to thee. And rain destruction on our enemies, oh, Lord, and bring grief to those who would have killed us in our home, and oh, Lord, we will assist thee in this work. We thank thee, Lord, and now amen!"

"Amen!" they all chorused fervently.

He got up briskly and brushed off his knees. "Now, we'll be gitting to town, and find Billy Glover's family and our Lance. They'll be taking care of us tonight, I reckon."

They turned to get into the cars. Sarah felt a little less wobbly, but she did not relish driving down the mountain in the dark. But it had to be done. She got in, got a firm hold on herself, and started the car.

The little girl called out, excitedly, from behind Sarah's shoulder, "Grandpop, it done started again!"

They all jumped. Sarah stopped the car again, and they peered out, fascinated.

Rumbling, rumbling, and another edge of the cliff rose up in a dusty destruction, vast and awe-inspiring in its terrible grandeur.

"They was sure after us tonight," said Howard Glover, when the rumblings and crashings finally stopped. "Reckon we git on fast as we can, Sary. They might come after us, feeling like that. Sure got murder on their minds!"

She tightened her lips. She had never felt so scared and so angry all at once. They had really meant to get that family! There would be little left of that cabin, nestled among the evergreens, and there would have been nothing but dust and crushed bones left of this large family.

She was thoughtful as she drove back to town. It actually helped her drive to have this to think about. Someone hated so much he would kill, and that someone was not her father, and it was certainly not her husband.

She pondered the words she had overheard at the door to her father's study. Her father had not been there, and she kept adding, "Thank God," whenever she thought of it. From what her cousin Franklin Tallentire had said, Neville knew nothing of what they were doing.

Franklin knew that Lance had been examining the books, and he had been enraged and frightened over it. So why had Lance examined the books? What did he ex-

pect to find? What was Franklin concealing? Did her father know any of this?

The car skidded, but the heavy snow tires kept them steadily on the road. Her wrists were weary, her hands aching when she finally reached the main road to River-town.

"Nice driving, Sary," said her father-in-law, breaking his long silence.

"She's a good wife for Lance," piped up the small girl, and Sarah was so grateful she could have hugged her. "She can drive, and she ain't scared to come up and save us."

"Reckon she be okay," said one of the boys, in an off-hand manner, which Sarah knew hid his real gratitude. She had seen the fear on their faces, and had been terrified herself. "Mom, she didn't know, but I figured our Aunt Sary was okay."

Aunt Sary. The words were sweet to the girl. She wanted to be their Aunt Sarah, their Lance's wife, belonging to them and with them, a part of the family. Maybe this would prove to Lance that she did care about them, that she did like them, that she wanted to belong.

"Where shall I drive you?" she asked Howard Glover.

"Billy Glover's. Reckon they'll be home."

She was silent, remembering the ringing of the phone. They pulled up at the house to find it dark and silent.

"You got a key?" she asked. "In case they aren't home?"

"They won't lock up," he said, placidly. He and the children got out of the car. One of the boys ran up on the porch, and tried the door. It was unlocked, and he went in and flipped on a light.

Sarah thought that was how Billy Glover's rifle had been stolen and returned to him. Everyone must know that Billy Glover did not lock his house.

The two women got out of the other car. Naomi walked around, stamping her feet, and rubbing her arms. She looked drawn and pale, Sarah thought, with pity. The two boys who had driven with the women piled out, and followed their cousins around the house, as though nothing had happened.

Naomi and Lizzy looked at Sarah, then walked over to her, as she stood awkwardly beside the large car. Naomi offered her hand solemnly, and Sarah shook it.

"Thank you, Sary. I'm sorry I said what I did," she said.

"It's all right, Naomi, we were strangers. I hope we won't be strangers any more," said Sarah, looking into the woman's eyes. "I'm part of the family, you know, because I married Lance."

"Reckon so. I won't forget it again."

Lizzy shook hands in silence. Howard Glover came over to them.

"Reckon we better git in out of the cold, girls. Git some supper into the young-uns, and they'll be better. Billy's folks must have went somewhere, but they'll be back. Sary, you coming in now? You must be cold."

She looked at the house, welcoming now, with the lights on. She looked into Howard Glover's face, kind and anxious, and so like Lance's.

"I reckon not," she said. "I'll go on home myself. You'll be all right here, won't you? There's room at my place," she made the offer awkwardly, not sure of what her father would say.

"We got more cousins here, thank you, anyway, Sary. Sure you won't come in a spell?"

The women had moved off to the house, going up on the porch, murmuring softly together. The children had gone inside to make themselves at home. Their cousins' house was their house; they accepted that without comment or surprise.

Howard Glover lingered. "Sure you won't come in? Lance will want to thank you, honey."

His gentleness brought tears to her eyes. But she shook her head firmly. "Thank you, no."

"You ain't gonna see Lance? You been fightin'?"

"He walked out on me, pop," she said, finally. She looked him straight in the eyes. "He walked out. If he wants to see me, he knows where he can find me."

"Pride don't keep a body warm at night, Sary," he said.

"Nope. But he isn't the only one with pride," she said.

He smiled, as though her words had pleased him, and the pleasant lines of his face deepened. He took her hand, and held it in his, the calluses pressed to her soft hand. "Glad Lance married you, Sary. You got spirit. You-all gotta work it out, though. I won't mess in. But you come on over, whenever you want. We ain't mad at each other, are we?"

"No, we aren't mad at each other, pop." Impulsively,

she leaned forward and pressed her lips to his lean cheek. He squeezed her hand gently, then let it go. He walked up to the house, turned about, and waved to her.

She waved back, then got in the car, and backed it away from Naomi's, before starting down the road. She felt alone, suddenly, yet warmer than before—warmed and comforted. They did like her. Lance's father and his whole family did like her. They would make out somehow. It would work out.

She drove home to find her father frantic with worry. "Where the hell have you been, Sary? Do you know it's past nine? And the roads icy as hell, and the weather warnings bad. What the hell got you so fired up you had to go out on a night like this?"

"I'll tell you in the morning, dad," she said, finally. She saw the haggard lines in his face. He hadn't been sleeping well; she knew that. "Right now, I want to eat something and have some coffee. Then I'm going right to bed."

He studied her face. "All right, honey, guess you know what you're doing. We'll talk in the morning, huh?"

Franklin Tallentire came out into the hall. His black eyes alertly going from one to the other. "Late, Sarah? What took you out in this weather?"

"I had a meeting," she said, lightly. "You're not the only one with business, Franklin. My gosh, I'm starved. You would think women would serve more than tea sandwiches for supper."

With this, she withdrew, went out to the kitchen, and began making coffee. Her father wandered out after her, but so did Franklin. Both men sat down with her to talk and eat.

She cooked eggs and bacon, toast and coffee, then, when they were still hungry, she fried some hamburgers and tomatoes in the same skillet, and served them. "Didn't you men have any supper?" she asked.

"Oh, we ate—I went to the diner," said her father vaguely. "Where did you go, Franklin?"

Caution edged the man's face, and he gazed down into his coffee cup. "Oh, I went out of town on business, met a man, and we talked over dinner. Food wasn't so good, though. You know, a man could get poisoned by some fish dinners? Met a man the other day, he had a bad spell by eating some fish in a restaurant."

Franklin rambled on about the subject of food poisoning, almost spoiling Sarah's appetite. But she finished her food and coffee, and reflected that her cousin had successfully changed the subject from the matter of where, and with whom, he had had dinner.

They sat together over coffee, for so long that Sarah finally despaired of any quiet talk with her father. She excused herself, and went up to her bedroom. She was drooping with weariness, and lay down for a while before getting up to undress for bed.

The phone had not rung. Lance had not called. She looked at the clock, and it was after eleven. He would have called if he had wanted to, she thought. Maybe he wasn't home yet. Or maybe he thought she would contact him if she wanted to talk.

Pride doesn't keep you warm in bed tonight, Lance, she thought, and tears stung her eyes.

She went to bed, and lay there, thinking about Lance. She missed him so much. Would he come tomorrow, and thank her, and look at her with his grave gray eyes, and let her break the barrier that kept them apart? She did not doubt him any more, she could not now. What could she do to bring them back together?

She made up little scenes in her mind, of Lance coming over and saying humbly. . . .

No, Lance would not be humble.

He would say, "Sary, I'm sorry, I was wrong about you. Come on back to me."

"No, he's the one that left," she said, aloud, and turned over in bed, and punched the pillow. "He has to come back to *me!*"

But Lance had pride, too much pride, and so did she. Yet her father was proud of her. And Lance seemed to like her pride and spirit. So did Lance's father.

She smiled a little at thought of his father, so soil-plain and mountain-high, so eagle-proud and straight. Just like Lance, she thought, and was grateful that she had met and married Lance. He was so fine, and she would love him and be worthy of him.

And one of these years, they, too, would have a family of tall straight sons, and proud girls, like the little girl who was his niece.

She dreamed some more, tossing and turning in the bed.

Lance would come over tomorrow, and say he was grateful, and he would not be humble, but she would be—

She would say, "I'm sorry about the difficulties between us, Lance, but if we try we can smooth them out. Please let us try to work things out between us. We can. I love you so much, and I think you love me, and between us, we can figure out all the answers. Only, I can't figure them out alone. I need you so much, I want you so much."

She rubbed her face against the pillow, and ached for him. It wasn't any good without him. Life was empty for her without him. She would forget her pride.

She would say, when he came, "Lance, I need you. I can't go on without you. Please come back to me."

And he would come, and hold her tight in his arms, and hug her fiercely, until her bones about cracked, and the ice around her heart would melt away, and she would be warm and happy once more, like springtime.

She would say, "Without you, it's like winter. I am cold and snowy and terrible, and stormy. I need you to make it springtime for me, with flowers and sweet scents and honey, and happiness. I need you so much, Lance, I can't live without you, it's no good, I have no pride without you, I have no strength and no will to go on living without you—please, Lance, come back to me—"

But what if he would not come back? What if he demanded some impossible price? Like her father giving up the mines? Like—what?

What would he demand? Why had he really left her? He had said he had gone to help Billy Glover's family. But with Howard Glover there, maybe they wouldn't need him so much.

And what, then, if Lance Glover did not come back to his own wife, Sarah? What if he was through with her? What if it was possible, no, even desirable for him to live without her? What if he didn't need her anymore, not to keep him warm at night, or to love and desire and live with?

What if Lance was through with her?

Chapter Sixteen

The next morning was Saturday. Sarah was tempted to sleep late, but as she lay there in bed she began thinking of all the events of the previous weeks. She had to talk to her father, quite frankly and completely.

She got up, bathed and dressed in a green wool skirt and matching sweater, then went down to breakfast. Mrs. Wilson was still gone on her errand of mercy, so Sarah started to prepare the coffee and bacon.

Her father wandered out to the kitchen. "Sarah, were we going to talk this morning?" His eyes were keen.

"Yes, dad, but—" She broke off, as Franklin followed her father out to the kitchen. In a bright voice, she said, "You men, you can smell food cooking a mile off! Be patient, it'll be fixed in fifteen minutes. Dad, shall we eat in the kitchen to save steps?"

He glanced over at Franklin, who was staring at them both, and nodded. "Sure, honey. Say, it is really icy this morning. I started out and almost fell on the back steps. Reckon I'd better get out the salt and do the sidewalks."

He sat down at the kitchen table, and talked determinedly about the weather. Franklin sat down rather uneasily, looking from one to the other of them. Sarah wondered if Franklin had received a report yet on the failure of his experiment last night. He probably had.

But he would not know how the family had escaped. Would he figure out that next? Sarah thought of the pistol in her pocketbook upstairs. She had not considered the necessity of carrying it in her own house!

She prepared breakfast, they talked casually about the weather, school, the political situation with the primaries coming up, taxes and the bond issue, and everything but strip mining and the Glover family. Sarah felt afterward

she had tasted nothing but the hot coffee which had burned her tongue.

Franklin finally left them. He said he was going out to see somebody.

"You going to the mine office this morning?" asked her father, casually.

"Nope, don't believe so. The workers laid off early yesterday, going back into the hills to see to their families. Reckon we won't have anybody around today." Franklin paused for some reaction.

Her father nodded, and sipped his third cup of coffee. Franklin finally departed reluctantly. Her father got up, went to the kitchen window, and watched the car pull out, as though concerned about the icy road.

When he came back to the table, he looked like a different man, stern, hard. "All right, Sarah. He's gone. Now tell me what has you nervous as a cat, and jumping around for hours at a time without telling me?"

"Okay, dad. It's time we had a long talk." She poured herself a third cup of coffee, and took a long breath. "Dad, something is very wrong with the mines, with the miners, with Franklin, with you and me and Lance and the Glovers."

"Not news," he said, quietly. His dark green eyes, so like hers, met hers across the table. "What happened last night? Start with that."

"All right. Though it starts earlier. We'll start there. Dad, I got home early from school, Orson let us out because of the weather reports and the ice. When I got here, Franklin was talking to Caspar Dickey in your study. I heard enough—yes, I eavesdropped deliberately—to learn they were plotting something against Howard Glover and his family, Lance's dad."

She paused, took a deep breath. Her hand was shaking. He put out his hand and put it on hers.

"Steady, girl. What did you do?"

"I borrowed your car, dad. I—I'm sorry, I should have told you the whole story, but Franklin was around, and I—"

"And you didn't quite trust me?" he asked, very gently, lines of hurt around his mouth and eyes.

"I'm sorry, dad. Never again," she whispered. "I've been so mixed up and confused. But now, I know it is Franklin,

and Caspar Dickey, they are the ones making trouble. Dad, I drove up to Howard Glover's—"

He exploded. "The hills? You drove up in those damn hills? Are you out of your fool head?"

She smiled faintly. "I kept thinking so, dad. I was scared as—as hell! But I did it. I got there, and persuaded them to leave. Howard Glover believed me, oh, dad, he is so sweet and good, he is just like Lance, hard and sweet too. I just love him. Anyway, we left—and—and—halfway down the first road we heard the explosions."

He stared, his face growing slowly white, so the green of his eyes got darker and darker. "Explosions—honey—!"

"Dynamite, dad. They set off a series of explosions which blew up the cliffs. You see, their house was set against a cliff. Franklin or you—I don't know which—had started strip mining above them—"

"Goddamn them! I found them up there months ago, and told them to get the hell out of there! I knew Howard Glover had his spread below. Didn't Franklin listen to me?"

She felt an enormous weight lift off her heart. "No, dad, he went ahead, deliberately, I believe. He has kept on stripping. And the explosions sent boulders down on the cabin. It is probably crushed. It would have—killed him and the two women and the four children."

He put his head down on his hands. He groaned. "Oh, God, oh, God—what have I done?"

She touched his hand, clasped it tightly, drawing it from his haggard face. "Nothing, dad. You did nothing. Thank God. It was Franklin all the time, wasn't it? You did nothing. Oh, dear God, how could I have doubted you?"

He pressed his cheek to her hand in silence.

"I got them out," she said, finally. "We were watching the explosions. Then dad, as we started on, there was a second series of explosions. The cliff just lifted right up in the air. We heard the crackling and crashing all that way. Howard Glover said we better get out before the men came after us. So we—Naomi and I—drove down the mountain and back to town. I left them at Billy Glover's house."

"Was Lance there?"

"No. No, the house was dark when we got there."

"He'll go crazy," said her father slowly. "And God, baby, he'll think I did it. Oh, what am I going to do now? I wrecked your marriage, I did it, without wanting to, honey, you have to believe I didn't mean to wreck anything you loved. I've watched you going to pieces inside without your man, and I couldn't do anything about it."

She clenched her hand so tightly about his that it hurt them both, but they didn't care. "It isn't wrecked, dad. I won't let our marriage be wrecked. We'll work it out. And Lance will know you didn't do anything against his people. His dad knows, and will tell him. But dad—Lance has gone up to the mines, and looked at the books. He is looking for something."

Her father started, his face shocked. "*What?*"

"And Jeannie Frasier has told me that someone is signing your name to checks. And I think someone is answering the phone and speaking for you, as though you were the one on the line. Dad, I think Franklin is working some sort of double-cross, maybe forging your name to checks and maybe fixing the books. We have to find out what he is doing."

He swallowed, staring at her dumbly. Finally he shook his graying head. "No—God—what can be—Franklin! I trusted him, I believed him. My God, he's my own flesh and blood—my cousin's boy."

"He is greedy and cold and selfish, I think," she tried to speak dispassionately. "He will do anything for money and power. Dad, I have a hunch. He is the one who wanted to wreck my marriage to Lance. Did he talk to you against us, talk about Lance, try to say that Lance was after my money?"

Her father nodded.

"Well, he was wrong. Lance is too proud for that. Too good. So Franklin had his motives. He got you to change your will so he will always manage the mines. And he goes out and nags and threatens people who own land he wants. I'm sure he does that in your name."

"If he would do that, he would alter the books. Damn it, I've trusted him too much! Sarah, I'm going up to the mines, and look at the books. I've left too much to that man. I've got to find out for myself what he is doing."

"And another thing, dad. I have heard he meets Caspar Dickey two and three times a week, at some roadside res-

taurant, and they talk for hours. I think he has Caspar Dickey in his pocket, taking him—away—from yours." She gulped over the last words.

Her father grimaced. "All right, Sarah, rub it in. You are right. If a man will cheat for you, he'll cheat against you just as fast."

He got up from the table with determination. "I'm going right on up to the mines."

"I'm coming with you, dad." She got up also, leaving the clutter of dirty dishes and pans. She glared at him, with some of her old spirit. "Don't try to stop me—"

"Honey, if he turns up, and is mad—"

"There'll be two of us, then."

She did not wait for his agreement or protest, she went up to her bedroom. She got her coat and scarf, then the pistol. She seemed to hear Lance saying, "Don't go anywhere without the pistol, honey! Carry it—keep it loaded—and for God's sake, put it where you can reach it."

She started to put it in her pocketbook, then hesitated. She checked the loading again, then put the small pistol in her pocket. It was not too conspicuous a bulk.

She ran downstairs, and joined her father, waiting in the hallway. He had a ledger with him, and was leafing through it.

"This is my own personal record. I'll check it against the office records," he said quietly.

"All right, dad. Let's go. Shall I drive?"

"No, I can still drive, even though I stopped thinking for a while," he said, with some of his old dryness and sarcasm. But he grinned, and tucked her hand into his arm as they went out.

The drive up to the mine office was icy. Neville Tallentire negotiated it in the big car, with the wheels pulling heavily and skidding at times. But he had driven this route hundreds of times, and knew every turn and curve.

They parked at the mine office. The works were deserted. He unlocked the door to the small office, and they went in.

She said, as though casually, "Lance got a key to the office from somewhere, dad. I guess he was determined to check the books."

"That smart scamp. Why didn't he speak to me?"

"I don't know. He never said anything to me either. I think he didn't want to talk until he was sure of the facts."

"Cautious bastard. You married a hellion, Sarah. You hang on to him. He'll run the mines someday—or close them down!"

She smiled a little at the new pride in his tone. He sat down at his desk, hung his coat across the top of his tall-backed chair, and began looking over the ledgers, comparing the office record with his. She was still chilly, and kept her coat on, pacing about the office.

"Goddamn," said her father softly. He was frowning, as she turned to look at him. "Goddamn! Franklin has been making out stock in his own name! Look at this!"

She looked at the forms, but did not understand them. Her father did, however, and cursed softly as he examined them.

"Twenty thousand, twenty-two, damn it! Got over twenty-two thousand dollars worth of stock transferred to his name over the past year. Wonder if he did before then." He looked over some earlier papers, shook his head. "Just started about a year ago. Damn it all!"

He leafed through some other papers rapidly, then began examining, spot-checking through the ledgers.

"He is depositing money to his own checking account from company funds," he announced presently. Sarah opened her coat. She sat down in a chair and looked soberly at her father.

"Would Lance—would he understand books enough to know that Franklin was doing that, dad?" she asked.

"Don't know. Wouldn't be surprised. He has a lot of talent, comes out in unexpected places." He was frowning over some other entries. "Twelve, fifteen, sixteen—sixteen thousand transferred from the Tallentire Mining Company to account of Franklin Tallentire. Goddamn—he must think I'm an idiot! Goddamn, I was an idiot! Let him write out checks and sign them, figured he was honest, and a Tallentire. I'm a fool!"

She waited in silence while her father went over some accounts, figuring rapidly on pads of paper, cursing softly now and then. His face was flushing with anger, as he realized how he had been duped over the past year. She studied his face, lovingly, anxiously. He was looking so

much older than he had before. He was getting tired of this burden.

That was probably why Franklin had fooled him so easily. The prospect of having a willing and honest manager to handle the mines and its affairs had tempted him. He was getting old and tired, wanting help, too proud to ask. When Franklin Tallentire had walked in three years ago, the opportunity was there, and temptation was ripe. He would just let the younger, able man start to take over the mines.

"Dad, I think he is doing things behind your back, about the strip mining," she said, presently, when he paused and leaned back wearily. "I have heard talk—rumors—he is threatening farmers who wouldn't let him strip. There are at least five farms I know of where he is stripping without permissions."

"I never told him to do that. I told him to get permission, proceed with caution. Damn him. Can't he follow orders?"

"I think he meant to take over from you. Dad—have you ever thought that after you made out a new will, with Franklin as manager—that you might not have lived very long?"

He stared at her, ruffling his graying hair once more until it stood up in frantic peaks. "Franklin?" he said, in a sort of daze. "Yes—yes, I guess he could. I never thought. He got me so mad at Lance, deliberately, I reckon, that I never thought the danger would be from another direction."

They both sat and thought about that for a while. Sarah felt more and more uneasy. The papers were scattered about the desk, the ledger books open, and stock forms laid on them. She got up, finally.

"Dad, I think we had better go. If Franklin comes back and—" She stopped abruptly. Someone had come softly into the room.

"If he comes back—what, Sarah?" She whirled about, to find Franklin Tallentire standing there, a rifle poised in his arms, pointed at her father.

She gasped, backed away, staring. Her hands went to her breasts. The rifle shifted briefly to her, then back to her father.

"Stay still, both of you. What are you up to?" The

snarling tone was quite different from the usual fawning tone he gave her father. He glanced down at the desk, at her father's face, at the books and papers again. "What did you do, Neville? Damn you, you been meddling, haven't you?" His voice was cold, deadly cold.

Her father laid his hands deliberately, palm down, on the ledger books. "Reckon it's up to me to ask that question, Franklin. What have you been up to? You been altering the books, haven't you? Embezzling funds? Making out stock to yourself?"

The rifle pointed more surely. "You would look into it. You should have stayed away, Neville! Now you're really in trouble."

"I don't think so," said Neville Tallentire, frostily. "I'd like some explanation. What have you been doing? You have been meeting Casper Dickey. I'd like to know about that. What have you planned between you?"

"One plan went astray." Franklin glanced furiously at Sarah. "Some damn female tattled to Glover, and the family got out. We could have blasted them to bits, and broken this feud wide open. Time Lance Glover woke up, he'd be dead as they was—and Billy Glover up for murder in the county jail. It would be the end of the Glovers—and the end for you and Sarah too! I mean to take over this mine, and I'll do it anyway!"

"Looks like you have made a good start, with all the stock transfers into your own name." Neville Tallentire spoke as coolly as though a rifle was not pointed at his head. "Did you want the mines so badly? I was paying you well."

"Keeping most of the money for you and Sarah! Sure, thanks so much, uncle, for the handout! Paying me peanuts for doing all the work! And keeping the thousands for yourself!" He was snarling, his face ugly, working. The rifle was pointed in deadly aim. Sarah could almost see the thoughts working in the dark head. He would kill them both, and take his chances.

She dared not move. Her hands were near her breasts, she dropped them slowly, slowly to her waist. Her right hand was still too far from the right-hand pocket of her coat, where the pistol lay.

"You didn't think you would get away with this forever, did you?" asked Neville. "Lance knows, you know. He has

been up here examining the books. He was the one who tipped us off, that you were cheating me, embezzling from the company. If anything happens to us, he will sure talk. He happens to love Sarah, you know." Still the calm conversational tone, with the quiet coolness of the hill man behind it. He kept his hands quietly on the ledger, motionless.

"I ain't worrying about Lance Glover!" The mask was off entirely. The harsh violent temper of the man, the ugliness was revealed. He laughed out shortly. "He got troubles of his own. Daniel Jameson and Rory McCleary are on his track right now! The damn fool decided to go up to the cabin up there, get some stuff of the family. And he's alone. Easy picking for two men who hate his guts!"

"Oh—no," said Sarah, faintly. She put her left hand to her throat, her right hand crept steadily toward her right pocket. "You would not—not Lance—"

"Right, cousin. And this rifle is Lance's. When you and your dad are found with bullets in you, the good sheriff won't have any trouble tracing the bullets to this rifle. Which is Lance's. And the good sheriff will figure out the same answers as he figured out for Billy Glover. The rifle belongs to one man, and that man fired it. Easy, huh?" And he barked another short laugh. His eyes were hard, his arms were becoming fixed, his finger on the trigger starting to move.

She had reached the pocket. There was no time to pull out the gun. She shot through the pocket, shot the way Lance had taught her, right for the center of the body. She fired, once, twice, then a third time as he was falling.

The crash of the pistol, the crack of the rifle firing, and the chair in which Neville sat all sounded at the same time. Franklin fell to the ground, the rifle falling from him, blood streaming from his stomach and arm. He lay motionless.

Sarah ran to her father, where he lay in the ruins of his chair. He was already swearing, trying to get out.

"Dad—you're hurt!"

"No, honey. I just crashed myself back out of the path—my God, honey, you were fast! Lance teach you to shoot?"

"Yes, are you sure you're all right?" She helped him

up, hands trembling, going over him. He seemed all right, only breathless.

"God damn it, that boy is all right. Teaching my girl to shoot like that, just like a bird out of the sky! Goddamn!" He sounded proud and rueful all at once.

He got up. They both heard footsteps outside, the door crashing open. Neville snatched up Lance's rifle from the motionless body of Franklin. Sarah had her pistol out. When the astonished miners stumbled into the room, they found a rifle and a pistol pointed right at them.

The lead miner gaped, backed, pushing into his buddy behind him. As the buddy did not move, they were in the awkward position of being crammed into the doorway. "Huh—shots—huh? Thought we heard . . ." They both stared cross-eyed at the guns, then down at Franklin.

"He tried to kill us," said Neville Tallentire, lowering the rifle. "Caught him embezzling, messing with the books. Thought he could get away with it. See if he is dead."

The miner thought about it, then ventured to move forward and look at Franklin more closely. He touched his pulse, fingered the throat.

"Still alive," he said.

"Take him to the hospital, then. Go on, move him out. Don't want to see him again. Tell the sheriff I'll report to him when I got time. Got urgent business elsewhere. Move!" he added sharply, as the miners stood there awkwardly.

They moved, and took Franklin out, bleeding. Sarah tried not to look at him. He was her cousin after all. But he was trying to hurt them, trying to kill Lance.

"Lance," she said, sharply.

"Yeah, honey. Reckon we got to get moving." He opened the rifle, checked the shots. "There's a shotgun around here—oh, yeah—" He pulled it out of the closet, handed it to Sarah. "And some bullets for them both. You got more ammunition for your little pistol, there?"

"Yes, in my pocketbook."

"Okay, honey. Let's go. No time to get the sheriff. Think you can find Lance's cabin again?"

"I know I can." She ran out of the small office, followed by her father. She climbed into the driver's seat, putting the rifle down beside her. She patted her pocket to make sure the pistol was still there. Her coat was

ruined, she thought. "Dad, we got to get to Lance in time. Did he say—Daniel Jameson?" She shivered.

"Yep. Let's move."

She drove at a reckless pace down the hill, backed out of a tight corner, whirled the car around.

"Easy, honey. Let's get there in condition to help him." Her father's cool tone calmed her a little, she slowed down, watched the icy roads with more caution. "I figure he might have started not long ago. Reckon Franklin just sent someone after him. And that Lance of yours would be on his guard, watching for someone. He's no fool."

"Yes." She breathed deeply to ease the pain in her chest. If anything happened to Lance now, she would never, never, feel the same joy in life she had felt before.

Lance. He had to live. He had to live. She would forget all her foolish pride, and beg him to come back. If only God would let him live.

She remembered the fervent prayer of her father-in-law, and prayed silently, "Oh, God, let us be on time. Oh, God, let us be on time, don't let Lance die. God, please, God, give me another chance with Lance! Give me a chance to prove I love him, and love his family, and am his forever—"

"Old Annie Oakley Sarah Tallentire Glover," said her father, into the confusion of her thought. "Old sure-shot Sarah. Sure-shot Sarah, that's my new name for you."

She had to smile a little, at the teasing in his tone, at the pride. "Dad, we have to get there in time—"

"Sure, we will. Can't go wrong now. You and me, Sarah, and that man of yours, we can take them on and lick them. Just take it easy, girl. Calm down. This is pure ice coming up, watch it there, honey." He coaxed her along, with calm, with humor, easing things for her. She turned off the main road, into the hills, Lance's hills.

Somewhere up there, Lance was in danger. She had to get to him in time. Daniel Jameson, the cold psychotic killer, was after him.

She drove up into the hills, over the ice-covered lanes, through patches of thick snow, and on and on, up and up. She had to get to Lance in time. He was her Lance, they could not have him, she thought fiercely.

She knew the road now. Knew it like the palm of her hand. Knew it like her body knew Lance's. Knew it like

the life laid out before her, empty if Lance was gone, full if he was there.

It was that simple for her. Life, or no life, for both of them.

Her father lifted the rifle, checked the loads again, took the shotgun and checked it carefully. "Which do you like better, honey, the rifle or the shotgun?"

"The rifle," she said briefly.

"I'll stick with the shotgun, then. Use your pistol if they get up close." His voice was mild as Lance's, mild as a summer breeze, with only that little deadly note in it to reveal his true thoughts.

"We'll do it, dad," she said, finally, as cold as he. Cold and determined. She would save her man. She had to save him, or she was dead inside.

Chapter Seventeen

The road seemed so endlessly long. Sarah settled into the long haul. Her foot seemed to ache then become numb on the pedal. The cold was getting to her.

Her father spoke a little, calming her, his easy tone helping her nerves. But it was so long, such a long distance to Lance.

"How far is it?" he asked once, as the path rose endlessly uphill, and round and round into the far reaches of the mountains.

"At least two hours. Lance drives it faster—or he did in good weather," she said. Her eyes narrowed against the glare of the ice and snow.

"It will take Jameson and McCleary at least as long as us. And Lance will hold them off," he said, comfortably.

She wished she could be as sure. The thought of Daniel Jameson, the cold killer who loved to kill, stalking Lance, finding him unawares, made her feel colder than ever, with a horrible fear. She thought, if he killed Lance, she would kill him! And she knew how the feuds started and why they continued. The hate could not be killed. It continued, the fires blazing, until all were dead. It was too fierce to die without avenging.

At last they came up into the stark mountains where Howard Glover had lived, back in the fastnesses of the hills where Lance had often walked and hunted. She remembered briefly the peace of those hills, as Lance had brought her to a quiet place, and they had made love. The expression of their love had been even more beautiful out in the open, with the evergreens nearby, and the red-berried bushes, and the singing of the birds, and the quick whisking of the squirrels and chipmunks. They had seemed part of nature and of life itself, full and glorious, ever renewing.

"I used to live up here," said her father, unexpectedly.

"Looks familiar. When I was a tadpole, my dad raised a cabin out here. We lived here for 'bout ten years, until I was ready for high school. Then we moved into town. Used to hunt around here. Isn't there a cabin up there to the left?"

She glanced briefly, nodded. "Yes, I remember it now. Some family lives back in there."

"Blacks," he said, remembering, pleased. "They bought from us. Never see him any more. Reckon he just settled in and stayed."

She turned onto the side path up to the Glover cabin. "We're getting near, dad."

"Yep. I remember now. When Franklin started stripping up on the cliffs, and I came up, I remembered—Glover built against the cliff." He reached for the shotgun, checked the loads once more.

"I wonder if Franklin is dead," she said, in a cool detached tone, frowning at the narrow ice-covered lane.

Her father glanced over at her. "Easier if he is still alive. I'd like a confession from him. Easier for you in court, and for me too," he said, thoughtfully. But she knew he cared as little as she whether the man was dead. He was already dead in their affections.

He had betrayed them, cheated them, lied about them, tried to destroy and then to kill them. He was dead to them.

Then they heard the sound of a shot, a single echoing blast. Sarah jumped, her foot hit the pedal harder. Her father put his hand on her arm. "Go slower, girl."

She eased down, they opened the windows to hear. The cold wintry air whistled in on them, chilling them. No further shot was heard. Fear whipped in with the cold air.

"Go slow. Pull up—wait—over there—"

They could see the cabin now, a pitiful smashed object, giant boulders lying on the crushed roof. An evergreen had fallen across the cabin, as though protecting it with dying green branches. How vast and destructive had the dynamite blast been, thought Sarah, that the big massive tree had also been felled.

The car crept along. She kept turning her head nervously, watching for Lance, watching for Jameson and McCleary.

Then they heard a shout, Lance's voice!

It came from the ruins of the cabin. "Sarah—on this side—pull up on the right! Behind the cabin!"

They could not see anyone. She obeyed him blindly. A shot blasted out of the woods to the left, and she knew where the enemies were.

She stopped the car over to the left of the cliff, on the right of the cabin, trying to turn it to start back. The car stalled. She tried to start it again.

Another shot whistled over their heads. She ducked down. Her father was fumbling with the shotgun and rifle. "Damn it, can't get out, they're in front too," he muttered.

Now they were here, and she had heard Lance's voice, she felt suddenly more calm and cold. She would do whatever she had to do, she thought.

She measured cautiously the distance between the cabin door and the car. Maybe fifty yards. But two deadly shots were out there, two killers who would not hesitate to kill again. She could not go to Lance.

As though her father read her mind, he put his hand on her arm. "Won't do no good for us to go to him. He got to come to us, honey. Let's save our shots and wait and see."

They waited. Another shot whistled toward them. This time, Sarah, eyes narrowed and watching, saw where the shot came from—a grove of tall bushes and three evergreens.

She lifted the rifle, aimed carefully for the darkest center of the place, and fired. As though in anger, two more shots came at her.

"You might have hit him, he's mad," said her father. He too watched for the shots, but saved his shotgun blasts for a more sure shot. "He's pretty far," he muttered. "Reckon they both got long-range rifles."

They waited, the long minutes dragged, became half an hour. Sarah felt more and more jittery. But she must wait too, and have patience, for Lance's sake. He would come to them when he was ready, she thought.

Half an hour dragged to an hour. Then more shots rang out. Lance had tried to emerge from the cabin. The shots drove him back inside.

Sarah shot at them, was not sure she had hit anything. One man was in the clump of bushes, another, she thought,

was in the pines on the far side, but she could not be sure. She thought he was moving back and forth.

"Wish we could get Lance out of there," her father muttered. "I'm gonna call him. Hold on, Sarah!"

He tooted the horn. Lance called, "Right!"

"Okay, honey. Start shooting and cover him! I'll take the fella on the right, you get the one in the bushes. Keep shooting till Lance gets in."

Sarah swung open the door on the driver's side, behind the protection of the car, and then held the rifle ready. Her hands were damp with sweat, she wiped them impatiently on her skirt and got ready again to fire.

"Ready—go!" said her father. He was leaning forward, his eyes alight for battle. He let go with the shotgun, and she aimed the rifle at the bushes. She fired again, again.

Lance came out of the cabin door like a bullet, ran like an Indian, crouching low and racing to the car. He got there, slid inside, as her father gave a cry.

Her father slumped against her. Lance turned and fired again at the far pines, with his rifle. His face was set and hard, his gray eyes black and gleaming.

"See to him," he said, curtly, with no greeting.

Sarah laid down the rifle, moved her father gently from where he had slumped down. Blood spurted from his throat. Lance glanced down, back again at the enemy.

"Git him on the floor in the back seat. Know how to make a tourniquet for the throat?" he said, his voice rough and hoarse.

"Yes. Oh—dad—" she whispered. Then she steeled herself, and hauled her father over the back of the seat, the blood falling on them both. She got him over, with a boost from Lance, fell over the edge herself, and crouched on the floor over her father.

She took a handkerchief from her pocketbook, saw the box of pistol bullets, took them out and laid them on the seat. She hurried, fastened the handkerchief, and set a pencil in the knot, turning it slowly, slowly, though her fingers shook and she was trembling. Finally the flow of blood began to slow.

"It's under control, Lance," she said, her voice quiet.

"Right, honey. Okay. You'll have to leave him on the floor, crouch up on the seat. Got your pistol?"

"Yes, let me reload a minute."

"Right. Take your time. Tell me when you are ready." He fired again out the window. "I'm almost out of ammunition," he said, his voice quiet. "You come in time, honey."

"How long have you been here?"

"I got here, they was waiting—reckon I was here about an hour before you came. I just made it into the cabin, when they started shooting. Grazed my forehead, that was all. I pinked one of them, but they are both shooting. How did you know?"

"Franklin. He caught us going over the books in the mine office, held a rifle on dad. I shot him," said Sarah. "I'm ready now, Lance. Go when you are ready."

"You know about the embezzling, what he was doing to your dad?" he asked, before he started the car. She caught his quick glance over his shoulder, as he was slid down in the front seat, his gray eyes still hard, but gentling as he looked at her.

She nodded. "We can talk later, Lance, but dad and I got it figured out. Wish we had known before. He didn't know that Franklin was trying to take over the mines. I think—Franklin would have had him killed, me also—he was going to kill us at the mine office with one of your rifles, and lay the blame on you."

"Franklin dead?"

"He's hurt bad. Two miners took him to the hospital."

Lance finished reloading his rifle, laid it on the seat beside him. "Okay, honey. Now, you keep your pistol ready out to the right of the car. If anyone comes at us, you shoot, quick. I got to keep my mind on the driving, there's a bad patch below the cabin. Ready?"

"Ready, Lance. And I love you very much." She said it steadily, almost coldly.

"I love you like hell, Sarah!"

Then he started the car, whirled it around, and started toward the path. She was watching, narrow-eyed. At first, there was no reaction. Then, as the car lurched toward the crest of the hill, a man came out of the bushes and toward them.

His face was afire with the lust to kill, his eyes burned black with hate. He was raising his rifle at them, he was racing toward the car. As they approached, he was coming close, closer.

He was almost to the car. He was lifting his rifle, aiming at Lance in the driver's seat. Sarah fired point-blank with her pistol, straight at the face of the man, Daniel Jameson, the killer.

The pistol roared. She saw instantly the effect of her shot, first a small innocent hole, then the crimsoning of the blood over the face, as he fell backward with the force of the shot. Then the car was past.

"Get him?" said Lance.

"Yes—yes—" she whispered, feeling a little sick and faint. She let the pistol drop from her suddenly heavy hand. She would see that face in her nightmares, she thought. The hard set face of the killer, with the lust to kill in his eyes, the surprise of his face as he saw her pistol aiming at him, yes, he had seen her at the last moment, she thought.

He had seen her, and he had seen death, she knew. That bullet had been straight into his brain. She had killed a man.

The crimson had spurted from the face, all over the face. The blood. . . . She looked down on herself, and found blood on her clothes, on her coat, on her hands. For a frantic horrified moment, she thought that the blood of Daniel Jameson was on her.

Then she remembered, and bent to her father. The car was lurching and hurling itself down the icy path, sliding, being caught by a steel-hard foot on the brake, then lurching on down and down the hills.

The bleeding had started again. Her father was unconscious, the throat covered with blood. She reset the handkerchief, rewound the pencil in the knot, and concentrated on holding him as steady as she could.

"How is he?" said Lance, presently.

"Bad, Lance," she said, a tremor in her voice.

"Get the bleeding stopped?"

"Most of it now. But it's still—so much. He lost so much."

"He's a strong man, in good condition," said Lance, quietly. "You keep your head, honey. You done fine so far. You been great. Just keep on. We'll soon be at the hospital."

"All right, Lance."

His words calmed her. She eased her father into a bet-

ter position, supported him, with arms that ached. She held him on a seemingly endless journey, around and around, down the icy roads. She was aware that Lance was driving too fast, driving like a maniac. She would not stop him, or disturb his concentration.

He was doing it for them. She would—must—help all she possibly could. By staying calm, by holding her father, by keeping quiet and letting Lance do the driving.

Lance whirled the car around the bend, the wheels slipping and sliding. He said, "Good snow tires on this car, Sary."

"Yes, they are very good," she agreed, numbly.

He was quiet again, concentrating. She saw the set hardness of his jaw, the frown lines around his eyes, the grim lines around his mouth. Her man, she thought proudly, her fine tough man. Her dad had approved of him, "a tough bastard," he had said with a laugh in his tone.

They came to the road leading down to the highway. And she drew a deep unconscious sigh of relief. Now they were coming to safety. Lance turned into the highway, slowed, as cars were coming toward them.

Then he put his hand on the horn, and began sounding it, steadily. Cars pulled aside for them to pass. She held her father closely against her as the car went faster and faster along the main highway. Lance kept one hand on the horn, blasting it imperiously, again and again, and kept on going into Rivertown.

They went into town doing over eighty, she figured. He did not slow down. With the horn blasting a way for them, Lance made it to the hospital.

He glanced briefly at his watch. "Did it in an hour and twenty minutes," he said, quietly, at the hospital entrance, and turned a little-boy grin to her.

The ambulance men jumped to the door, and helped ease Neville Tallentire out of Sarah's arms, to the waiting stretcher. They whisked him inside.

She sat limply in the back seat, while Lance, driving very slowly, pulled the car into a parking lot, and got out. He came to the back seat, and opened the door, and looked at her.

"Come on, honey. Now the waiting begins. But we're here, Sary."

She reached out her bloody hand to his, and he took it

and helped her out. She was conscious of her weariness as they walked to the emergency entrance. She saw a nurse staring at them, her mouth opened a little.

They walked in, and Lance said, "Reckon I'll get cleaned up a little. Nurse, you got a bandaid?"

The nurse stirred herself. "Good land—come over here."

She took them into a cubicle. Lance had a cut on his shoulder, and Sarah helped ease off his coat. The nurse brought another doctor to tend to him, and stood by with professional briskness, curiosity strong in her eyes.

"You hit any, Sary?" Lance asked her, as they looked at the flesh wound, and decided the bullet was not inside the flesh. He looked over at her keenly.

She shook her head, looking down at herself. "This is all—dad's blood," she said, choking on the words.

"They are looking after him," he said. He brushed his hand impatiently at his forehead.

"You've got another cut on your head, Lance," said Sarah, suddenly concerned.

"Just a cut," he said. "It stopped bleeding."

The nurse looked at it, then the doctor, and it was treated and a bandage placed over it, near the right eye.

She shuddered to think how close it had been. Lance had been hit twice. If the bullets had been any nearer their mark—the one on the forehead could have killed him, or the wound on his shoulder, if he had been moving and the bullet had hit in the heart—

She would have lost him.

And her heart would have stopped also.

But he was alive, and talking calmly to the doctor, giving the report.

Finally, they were through with him. The nurse helped Sarah sponge some of the blood from herself, and wash her hands and face. "Now, you just wait in the room over here," she said. "We'll tell you when the doctor has a report."

On her father. A report on her father. Sarah looked at Lance, and suddenly she was shaking all over again.

"Easy, honey. Don't break now. You're doing fine," he said, and put his big hard arm about her, and took her over to a couch. "Now, we're going to wait, and be quiet, and pray. Okay, honey? He's a tough bastard—he'll last."

"That's—what he said—about you—" she stammered, and put her head down on his good shoulder.

"Poor, Sarah, the only men in her life are tough bastards," he said, in a gently teasing tone, and his big hand softly stroked back her hair from her forehead. "Good thing she is a tough girl herself, right?"

She sighed, and leaned against him.

Chapter Eighteen

Now that it was no longer necessary to act, Sarah felt the reaction as it set in. She was shaking. Lance kept his hard arm about her, as they sat together. She leaned back against him, and shivered and shivered. He soothed her gently, his big capable hand stroking her face and her hair.

She lived over and over again the hours of that dreadful day. She saw Franklin's face as she shot him. The face of the killer, covered with blood, as her bullet hit home. Oh, God, she thought, she had shot two men, maybe killed them.

But Lance was safe, her man was safe.

Her father—if only he too might—she shuddered again, and leaned wearily against her husband. "Dad," she whispered.

"Honey, the doctor will tell us as soon as he knows. He's a strong man. We'll hear soon. Easy, honey." And his hand stroked back her long blonde hair.

They were silent then, waiting. The waiting was somehow worse than the action, she thought. No, not worse. Just the silence, the murmurings of the nurses and other persons around them—and the thinking. The thinking was bad.

She had her eyes closed, leaning against Lance, clinging to him as the only safe secure thing in her world, when she felt him stiffen. She opened her eyes slowly, dreading the news the doctor would bring.

But it was not the doctor coming in. It was Caspar Dickey. She stared at him in shock, with growing coldness and dislike. He was so shift-eyed, so pale and wormlike, like something grown in the darkness of evil.

Behind him came Sheriff Halliwell. Sarah stared at him, the big tanned man. And behind the sheriff, walking free

and easy and light-footed like the woodsman he was, came Billy Glover.

Billy saw them first, and a slight pleased smile came to his face. He walked over to them, put a hand on Lance's shoulder. "Well, boy," he said softly.

"Hey, there, Billy." Lance's voice was the same calm drawl, the way Billy talked.

Billy Glover looked down at Sarah, as she gazed up wide-eyed at him. "I'm out of jail, Sary," he said, with a little grin. "Guess you sure are Lance's wife. Been hearing all about it."

The sheriff came over to them, his hand on Caspar Dickey's arm, not quite arresting him, but keeping hold, thought Sarah. What was going on?

No one else was seated near them, though there were curious looks from the others in the room. The sheriff sat himself and Caspar Dickey in chairs opposite them. Billy Glover sat down on the couch with Lance and Sarah, so she was between them, and she felt curiously safe and protected. Billy was such a man, so strong and tough, so like Lance.

She remembered the morning, which seemed months ago. "How is Franklin, sheriff?" she asked.

"He's in the operating room," said Ephraim Halliwell. "Don't know his condition yet. Your pop is being worked on. Reckon he got a good chance, Mrs. Glover."

She looked at him steadily. There was another note in his tone to her, respect and confidence, she thought. "I shot Franklin," she told him. "Not dad. Franklin was holding a rifle on us. He meant to shoot us both and blame Lance. It was Lance's rifle."

"That's what I want to hear about, Mrs. Glover," he said. "Suppose you start at the beginning, and tell me. Reckon a lot has been going on that I need to know about to make proper reports."

Lance squeezed her shoulders encouragingly. "Want me to start, honey?"

The sheriff answered. "I want to hear from Mrs. Glover first, if you don't mind, Lance."

"Go ahead," said Lance, as though giving permission, not in a nasty way, but with authority. It was as though he said, he was giving permission for his wife to speak, and Sarah felt a little amused, touched, protected all at once.

Caspar Dickey was shifting in his chair, visibly uneasy, tongue licking his lips, darting eyes betraying his fear.

Sarah began her story. She told about how her father and she had begun to suspect the books had been tampered with. She told how they had gone to the mine office that morning. She told the story more fluently as she went on.

"Dad was looking over the books. He said that Franklin had transferred stock to himself, had taken money—"

"Did he say how much was involved?" asked Ephraim Halliwell. He was writing down notes in a slow painstaking way, in a small pad, licking the pencil now and then.

"Oh—I think twenty thousand, twenty-five in stocks, and about the same amount in cash. We will have to have an audit of the books, I believe," said Sarah.

"Maybe forty-five, fifty thousand dollars, embezzling," said the sheriff scribbling busily, adding with a triumphant stroke of the pencil. "Big sum. So what happened then?"

"Franklin came in, with the rifle pointed at us. He knew at once Dad had discovered the embezzlements. He said he would kill us with Lance's rifle. He had brought it with him, he must have known we were going up to the mine office. He knew that Lance had been checking on the books."

"And you had a gun with you, Mrs. Glover?"

"Yes, sheriff. Lance had given me a pistol—and taught me to shoot." Vaguely she touched her pocket. The pistol was there. She took it out and handed it to the sheriff. He held it with careful respect, looked it over, wrote down the serial number.

"I'll keep this a couple days, that is, if it's all right with you, ma'am." He asked several questions about their positions in the office, how she had shot, how her father had escaped being shot.

Then she told him, "Franklin had already said that Lance was in danger. He had sent Rory McCleary and Daniel Jameson up to follow him to his dad's cabin, to kill him there. He thought it would bring on the end of the feud. Lance would be suspected of killing dad and me. Daniel Jameson would kill Lance. And I think Jameson shot Donna Fox."

The sheriff stopped writing and looked at her keenly. She felt pierced by the hard look, and she met it bravely, glad for Lance's firm arm about her.

"Why do you think so, Mrs. Glover?" he asked, with deceptive gentleness.

"Because I overheard Caspar Dickey talking to Franklin about it."

They all turned toward Caspar Dickey, and the politician cowered in his chair. He seemed rather green about the mouth.

"Well, I'll have to conduct an investigation about this," said the sheriff.

"I didn't get involved in it! I was against it!" said Dickey, shrilly, fear in his eyes. "I'll tell you, sheriff, I advised Franklin against it! You only stir up trouble when you turn loose a killer like Jameson! He was the one who shot Donna Fox. He took Billy Glover's rifle, and he shot Donna Fox, then returned the rifle to Billy Glover's porch. But I didn't want it done! I told Franklin, this makes trouble, I said to him, you don't understand the folks about here! He didn't understand them, you see. He thought he could push and wrangle his way, and not get discovered. I said money is one thing, but murder is another thing—"

"I think you had best sign a statement about this, Mr. Dickey," said the sheriff, very gently. "Reckon this frees you, Billy Glover. Won't be no charges against you now. Now, Lance, reckon I'll hear your part of the story. Want to hear most about McCleary and Daniel Jameson. They alive?"

Lance told him tersely about the battle at the cabin, and added that he thought Daniel Jameson was dead. The sheriff asked, "And who shot Jameson?"

"I did—with that pistol," said Sarah quickly.

The sheriff looked at her with respect again. "Well, ma'am. Reckon we'll have to get signed statements from you, but that can wait. Justifiable homicide—self-defense," he added, thoughtfully, and scribbled some more neat notes in his pad.

She leaned wearily against Lance as they waited silently for the sheriff to finish writing. The sheriff got up. They looked up at him, a little surprised.

"Reckon I won't intrude now. Maybe you folks will all come to the office tomorrow and write out some statements. Meantime, Mr. Dickey, you come with me, right now, and you write out about Daniel Jameson being hired

to kill Donna Fox. You come on now, hear?" And his big hand lifted the man out of the chair.

"Sure, sure, but I didn't hire him!" Caspar Dickey cried out. "It was Franklin—you just ask him—it was Franklin Tallentire! He was getting greedy, and afraid he would be discovered—and he said—"

"You just come right along, and dictate it to the secretary, and we'll get it all straight," said the sheriff soothingly. His big hand seemed to lift Caspar Dickey out of the room.

There was a short silence as the three of them were left alone. Sarah closed her eyes, leaning against Lance. She felt drained and half-sick. If only her dad would live! The whole mess wasn't worth solving if her father did not live, she thought. And yet—yet she had Lance—she had Lance, and she pressed her face against his jacket.

"You want to go see your family?" asked Lance of Billy presently.

"I phoned Elly May from the jail. She knows where I am and that I'm free. I'll wait with you," said Billy, in his calm slow drawl. "How bad is Sary's pop?"

"Bleeding from the throat. But he's tough."

"Right. You get McCleary?"

"He was hit a couple times. Reckon the sheriff will send someone up there to collect them."

"Already done sent three men, armed. But if Jameson is dead, they won't have trouble with McCleary, I reckon."

The two drawling voices went on and on, soothingly, over Sarah's head. The voices were strangely welcome to her. These men were her family now, she thought.

"If only—dad is—aren't they taking a long time?" she whispered presently.

"Reckon it's only been about an hour since we come in," said Lance, holding her closer. Billy Glover reached over and took her restless hand and held it, pressing it with his callused hand.

"They have to set it up, then give him blood, and all that," said Billy gently. "Seen it a dozen times, in action, haven't you, Lance? Recollect a time when it was touch and go for several hours, but the fella pulled through. You got your dad in here to the hospital right fast."

"And Sarah had him tied up good," said Lance. "She's

real good in a pinch, Billy. Think I'll pat myself on the back for picking a fine wife."

"You do that, Lance." Sarah smiled feebly.

The doctor came in, came over to them. She tensed, sat up, stared at him fearfully. Lance held her gently. "Easy, honey."

The doctor smiled down at her. "He's still unconscious, and we gave him something to ease the pain. Sewed him, and gave him some blood," he said, comfortably, with the hill drawl in his voice. He was one of their own, she thought, with pleasure, a man who had trained and returned to the region to doctor here. "You check with us again tomorrow morning. Reckon you can come in and see him there. You want news, you can call me tonight. I'll be here until midnight."

"He's doing good, then?" asked Lance.

"As well as can be expected," said the doctor, in a routine manner. "He's tough, in good condition. We'll wait and see. But you can't do any more today. Go home and get some rest. Heard you was in a battle," and he looked at them curiously.

"That's right," said Lance, briefly. "But we came out the other side. Let's go home, Sary. Thanks doctor."

She murmured her thanks, and the two men escorted her outside. At the car, Billy Glover paused. "I'll be gitting on home to Elly May and the kids. Thanks a lot for looking after them while I was in jail, Lance."

"You'd do the same for me," said Lance. The men shook hands gravely. Then Billy turned to Sarah, and shook her hand.

"Pleased to have you in the family, Sary," he said. "You come over soon, hear? Pop wants to see you, and the kids."

"We'll be over soon," said Lance.

She smiled weakly, nodded. She was so tired, she wanted to sleep for a week, she thought. But as she and Lance drove home, she began to revive.

The long nightmare was over. Lance and her father were not guilty of all her terrible thoughts about them. They had had honest differences between them, egged on by the cunning of Franklin. Now she could trust them both, and she would never distrust them again, she thought.

She thought of Billy Glover and could not repress a little smile. He was a very tough man, she thought, and now he approved of her! She had shot two men today! She shivered again at the thought, wincing as she thought of the blood and the bullets. But she would have done it all over again—for Lance and her dad.

The winter day shone brilliantly. The ice was melting a little, glittering in the sunshine. It would freeze again tonight, probably, and from the looks of the sky there would be more snow. A beautiful blue and white day, glowing over Rivertown, shining in her life.

She nestled her head against Lance's shoulder.

"Tired, sweetheart?" he said.

"A little tired," she said.

He drove into the lane down to the garage behind the large mansion. "Mrs. Wilson still looking after her niece?"

"Yes. She thought she would be able to come back next week sometime."

They went into the kitchen. It was quiet in the house, very quiet, and peaceful. Sarah and Lance went up to the bedroom, changed and washed, and went down again to the kitchen. They fixed ham and eggs, coffee and toast, and ate hungrily.

"Seems a long time since breakfast," said Lance. He held her hand gently as he lifted the coffee cup with his other hand. "Sary, I'm sorry I doubted your loyalty. It wasn't a big doubt, I just thought you couldn't tear yourself from your dad, and you was choosing him instead of me."

She blinked back tears. "I didn't want to have to choose, Lance. I couldn't believe he was behind those terrible things. Neither were—you."

He nodded. They talked a little, quietly, clearing away their final doubts and reservations. They finally understood each other, and were free to love without a conflict of loyalties. Sarah had proved herself, she thought, with some pride. She had won over Lance's family as well as Lance.

"And about the strip mining," said Lance, rather slowly, looking at her questioningly. "Maybe between us, Sary, someday your father will give it up. I know he won't attack the farmers now—he'll do it more humanely—"

"Yes, I know. But he—Lance, he will probably still want the lands with coal in them."

There was a painful silence.

Finally, Lance said, "I can't expect him to stop all at once. It's his work, his life. But if you could get him to be more gentle. . . ."

"Yes, Lance. Yes. I think he will be. And maybe someday—maybe he will close down the strip mining operations completely—I hope he will. Maybe there will be other sources of power. Atomic energy plants," she said, hopefully.

"Could be. We can't see all the future."

"But, Lance—" She hesitated, squeezed his hand hard. "Lance?"

"Sure, honey."

"Don't—ever—please don't ever leave me again!" she blurted out. "I can't bear it—"

"It hurt me too, honey."

"But when you left me—I died a little—don't ever leave me again! If you have to go, take me with you!"

"You think I won't? I ain't leaving you again. You belong to me." And he smiled at her, in the old, wicked twinkling way, that made her heart lift and her lips smile again.

They watched the evening news on television, and heard about their own activities of the day, with some wonder at the strange detachment of seeing the scene at the cabin. Jameson was dead, McCleary was shown being removed to the hospital.

Later, they went up to bed, talking comfortably about the next day—getting Lance's clothes back from Billy Glover's house, seeing her dad, going over to his father's, and what they might do about his father and sister and the others.

"They could live here," she offered.

"No, too many families will clash. Besides, pop will want a place of his own. I think we'll leave them where they are for now. Come spring, we'll build a new cabin up there. Pop won't be at home anywhere but in the hills."

"I was thinking—some of the kids could live with us during the school year. They are so bright, and that school up there isn't the best," she made the offer a little carefully, watching his face.



Suspicion

Rivertown is a village of two opposing forces about to explode in violence. Sarah's father is the leader of one group, the man she loves the other.

When two graves are wantonly disturbed, tomorrow's torment becomes tonight's suspicion . . . catapulting Sarah into a dark storm of fear, secret desires—and sudden death!

He paused in putting on his pajama top. His brown chest showed the bandage, a raw red scar appearing above it, reminding her of how close he had been to death that day.

"Sounds like a good idea, honey. We'll see. They'll be going to our school this winter now. We'll find if they like it, and can keep up. But it will be a peck of work for you to take care of them all, and teach also."

"Oh—I might quit work at the end of the school year," she said, her face suddenly scarlet, avoiding his look.

"Quit work? You want to?" he asked, casually.

"You said I could—if—if—" She could not finish the sentence. She slid the nightgown over her head, and tied the top ribbon carefully with shaking fingers.

He came over to her, tilted up her face, looked down at her with shining gray eyes. "Honey?" he made it a question.

She nodded. "I—think so—Lance. I'm pretty sure. A baby—"

He bent and kissed her lips, a hard passionate kiss which took her breath away. "You crazy girl, driving up there after me—you might have hurt yourself—"

"I wouldn't have wanted to live—if you weren't—living, Lance."

He kissed her again, and drew her over to the bed. His hands were gentle on her, his kisses sweet. The long terrible day was over, and now they were together, closer than ever before, she thought.

Never to be separate again. Always to be together. Close and hard and tight and loving.